

# LAOS – THE JEWEL OF THE MEKONG

A **landlocked country** nestled between Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China and Myanmar; Laos is often overlooked on the generic tourist trip to South East Asia. This said, in the last few years more and more people are choosing Laos as their magical new destination, one of the few countries in the region that remains unspoilt by modern development, political tensions and pollution. A country where Buddhist beliefs and traditions are still genuinely practiced where more than 48 ethnic minorities with diverse dress and traditions can be seen authentically going about their daily routines and the last place that still truly feels like the romantic former Indochina.

Luang Prabang is by far the most popular and fastest growing destination in Laos usually stealing the travelers' heart upon arrival. Encircled by mountains and located between the Mekong and Nam Kham rivers the former royal capital and UNESCO World Heritage site features a majestic blend of gilded temples, decadent French colonial architecture and breathtaking natural scenery. It is resplendent of early 20th century Indochina and attracts a number of high end tourists due to its natural beauty, the many fine French restaurants, wine bars and deluxe boutique hotels. Luang Prabang is also a popular destination for those seeking nature and soft adventure with many activities such as kayaking, elephant riding, trekking and biking located nearby the town, not to forget the beautiful waterfalls and historic Pak Ou Caves. A great way to visit the



stunning temples and peaceful scenery is by environmentally friendly Electrical Bicycle.

Tourists choosing to travel by land from Luang Prabang to the Laos capital of Vientiane usually opt to do so stopping overnight at either Vang Vieng or Phonsavan. Vang Vieng is a laid back town popular with backpackers and famous

for tubing, bars and caves and set amongst a striking mountainous panorama. Phonsavan is home to the mysterious Plain of Jars, a huge archaeological complex covered by plenty 2000 year old stone jars sized from 70 cm up to 3 or 4 meters. Their origin is unknown, it seems that they were carved into boulders,





several researches lead by the French archaeologist Madeleine Colani in the 1930's suggest that they could be old graves, but presently it stays an enigma. The Laos Capital itself is not hugely popular tourist destination but does offer some interesting activities for niche markets including an exploration into Buddhism and orchid trekking.

Another choice destination is Pakse in the south, an interesting small town with some colonial and Chinese buildings and a huge local market selling fresh food. Pakse is close to most of the main attractions in Southern Laos including; the prestigious pre-angkorian temples of Wat Phou, the Bolaven Plateau and its coffee plantations and waterfalls as well as the quiet and relaxing 4000 islands.

The biggest challenge for tourism growth in Laos is that it does not have any land marks to make it a 'must visit' destination. Whilst most people who do visit describe the coun-

try as 'Heaven on Earth' and regret not having included more time in Laos when planning their trip they did not know just how beautiful it is before they arrived as there is limited information provided online or in travel brochures and magazines promoting Laos.

Another challenge Laos tourism faces is that it is a land locked country with no major airport and therefore dependent on its neighbors and transit cities such as Bangkok and Hanoi for people to access the country.

As the country continues to grow and more people are exposed via different media to its charm and beauty Laos is sure to attract more travelers and tourists looking for a unique experience or just to relax and enjoy the architecture and nature of this timeless country.

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