



When you tell people you're thinking of visiting Southeast Asia, they'll probably assume it's to Bali or Thailand. They'd be forgiven if they thought this. We Aussies love our tropical beach getaways. But, there's a country in SE Asia that's so under the radar, most don't even know how to pronounce it: Laos.

"Where?"

Let your mind wander for a moment. Wrapping noodles ingeniously around your fork, as you sit cross-legged on your yoga mat, on a floating bamboo deck looking out across the mighty Mekong. Or, hiking through a forest to a three-level waterfall with water so emerald blue, you need to see to believe. Maybe canoeing through limestone caves or tubing down the river is more your thing.

So, while people may have never heard of Laos, once you show them the photos, it'll skyrocket to the top of their bucket list. If I could pick just one word for Laos, it would be *magical*. It's way less touristy than its southern, Thai neighbours, but that's not the reason why it's so special.



If you're travelling to South East Asia, consider visiting Laos. Image Credit: Unsplash

Why I decided to visit Laos

I had been to Laos' neighbours, Vietnam and Cambodia (and loved them), so I thought to myself, what's Laos like? As always, the best way to answer that question is by visiting. I recommend allowing at least 7-10 days to explore Laos. It's a short flight from Hanoi in Vietnam but you can also take a bus.

Although a ticket might cost you a couple hundred dollars (I know, it's expensive for Asia), it's worth it to get more time in Laos.



Laos is right next to Vietnam and Cambodia, so it's easy to visit on your SE Asian trip.

Day 1-2: Vientiane

Vientiane is the best place to fly into Laos. The national capital is more of a large town, nestled on the Mekong's bank. It's a great place to get acquainted with Laos culture before you work your way north.

My favourite thing to do in Vientiane is to visit the Buddha Park. It's a famous sculpture park with over 200 religious statues, including a 40-metre high Buddha. The park dates to 1958 and was built by a monk who studied Buddhism and Hinduism.

Don't miss Pha That, the gold Buddhist stupa, and start to get accustomed to the burnt orange, lush green and gold tones you'll see throughout the country (and many monks!). I remember seeing a sign nailed into the tree on the outside with a saying that stayed with me... *'We have not gone beyond decay'*.

Then, visit the COPE Centre to pay your respects to the Laotian lives affected by the 90 million bombs dropped by US forces during the Vietnam War. Laos was greatly affected and you'll feel the after-effects of it still present in the culture.



My favourite thing to do in Vientiane is visiting the Buddha Park.



Day 3-5: Vang Vieng

Three hours north is the infamous river-tubing town of Vang Vieng. Once notorious for its 'tubing parties', this beautiful town has so much to offer. If you can look past its backpacker vibe, you'll experience what made Vang Vieng famous in the first place.

Laze away on a cushion sipping a mandarin mojito gazing out along the Nam Song River. Walk over the bridge and follow the signs to nearby limestone caves (such as Tham Poukham Caves). It's a somewhat mystical walk, following the arrows through lush, dense forestry to the cave opening, where a guide will greet you.

There's a secret lagoon that's worth spending the afternoon at. Hire a scooter and take the short drive (no longer than 10 minutes from the bridge) to Blue Lagoon. Picture hammocks, ropes swinging into the water, beer, and people who have got relaxing to an art form. Don't forget your bathers.



The Blue Lagoon in Vang Vieng is a must-visit. Image credit: Laos Cultural Tours

Day 6-8: Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang was my favourite place in Laos. I fell in love with this laid-back, riverside town. I'm going to tell you two things: Utopia and Kuang Si Falls. We drove overnight from Vang Vieng to Luang Prabang, which took about six hours in the dark.

Remember that image I painted before? The yoga, the peaceful ambience, the wafting tropical scents, and the river views. This is Utopia. Get your zen on and relax here all day. Bring your book and forget your worries. After you've caught the sunset, wander down Sisavangvong Road to the night market. Marvel at the crafts, trinkets, and street food. Start your next day early and hop on a tuk-tuk to Kuang Si Falls (about 29 kilometres away). This will be one of the most spell-binding sights you'll ever see. There are various waterfalls but this is the best one. Trust me.



Kuang Si Falls has to be seen to be believed. Image credit: Lonely Planet

Day 9-10: Huay Xai

I didn't make it further north to Huay Xai but I heard on the 'traveller grapevine' that it's not to be missed. It's near the border of Thailand and offers one very unique experience for travellers: The Gibbon Experience. Labelled 'a childhood fantasy', you stay in treehouses of the Bokeo Nature Reserve, 'flying' from one to the next to meet the wildlife that the non-profit organisation aims to protect.

Lonely Planet awarded the Gibbon Experience one of the 10 World's Most Extraordinary Places – yet another reason for me to return to Laos, my new favourite country in Asia.



The Gibbon Experience in Huay Xai. Image credit: Laos Tourist



How affordable is Laos?

Laos is just as cheap as Thailand and Vietnam, and the only thing you might pay more for is flights in and out. But that's because it's not as touristy (which is a good thing).

Transport and getting around

The best way to get around places while you're in town is on a tuk-tuk. If you're going to travel longer than two hours, it's best to hire a local driver. Expect to pay \$40-50 for a four to six-hour drive. Between the main tourist towns (like Vientiane to Vang Vieng), local providers will sell seats in minivans.



A tuk-tuk is the best way to get around Laos. Image credit: Laos Tourism

Accommodation options

Guesthouses are my favourite way to stay in Laos. They're just as cheap as hostels but offer a more authentic, local experience because you stay with a family. You can find different homestays on [Booking.com](#). You will need a visa to enter Laos, which you can get at the airport (Vientiane and Luang Prabang only). You'll need to carry a passport photo with you.



A homestay is one of the accommodation options you can choose from when in Laos. Image credit: Stray Asia

How to get a visa

But, to save waiting once you arrive, send your passport to the [Embassy of Laos](#) before your trip. Just make sure you do this at least four weeks before your departure date. I visited Vietnam and Cambodia, too, so I did my three visas in one hit.



There are so many things to discover at the markets in Laos. Image credit: Laos Tourism

My most memorable travel moment in Laos

One of my fondest travel moment (ever) was in Vang Vieng. We were walking down the main street and a local family ushered us in. Initially hesitant, a warm, friendly smile, beaming from ear to ear put my mind at ease. After a three-hour dinner, I walked out feeling guilty for questioning their motive. They wanted nothing from us, but our company. This is the best way to describe Laos.

Like I said, utterly magical.