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Tour Notes

Laos – The Secret Heart of Asia

Tour Duration - 16 Days



Tour Rating

Fitness ●●●○○ | Off the Beaten Track ●●●●○ | Culture ●●●●● | History ●●●●○ | Wildlife ●●●○○

Tour Pace

Busy

Tour Highlights

- ✓ The delightfully friendly city of Vientiane. Enjoy sunset overlooking the Mekong
- ✓ Observe the cultural diversity of the tribes in the area of Luang Namtha
- ✓ Many opportunities to observe village life, traditional customs and practices and interact with locals
- ✓ Take a spectacular 2-day journey cruising down the mighty Mekong River
- ✓ The gleaming temples and magical atmosphere of wonderful Luang Prabang
- ✓ UNESCO world heritage listed Wat Phou, pre-dating Angkor Wat
- ✓ Authentic coffee culture and the spectacular waterfalls of the Bolaven Plateau
- ✓ Kick back in the laid back and enchanting 4000 islands and try your hand at fishing



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Tour Map



Tour Essentials

- Accommodation:** Mix of Comfortable hotels and guesthouses with private bathrooms
Included Meals: Daily breakfast (B), plus lunches (L) and dinners (D) as shown in the itinerary
Group Size: Maximum 12
Start Point: Vientiane – you can arrive any time on day 1
End Point: Pakse – you can depart any time on day 16
Transport: Minivan, boat, internal flights
Countries: Laos



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Laos – The Secret Heart of Asia

A unique tour to South East Asia's best kept secret, Laos, where we get well beyond the tourist trail. We start this cultural odyssey in Vientiane, Laos' delightfully friendly capital, studded with crumbling French mansions, bougainvillea--blooming streets and steaming noodle stalls. Next up is the little visited North of Laos to experience the ethnic diversity of the many hill tribes in the region of Luang Namtha and observe local customs and traditions. A 2-day journey down the mighty Mekong River then awaits culminating in an arrival in Luang Prabang, which captivates even the most jaded travellers with its brew of gleaming temple roofs, crumbling French provincial architecture and multi-ethnic inhabitants. Next we head south to the spectacular lush jungle of the Bolaven Plateau and immerse ourselves in authentic coffee culture and visit some of the most alluring scenery in Asia, the landscape scattered with volcanos and sparkling waterfalls. The conclusion of this off the beaten track adventure takes us to the enchanting 4000 islands, an area where time stands still, and revel in the joy of leisurely exploring villages by bicycle or tuk tuk and even try your hand at fishing. Join us to experience the hidden charms of Laos.

Tour Itinerary Notes

While our intention is to adhere to the day-by-day itinerary as printed below, a degree of flexibility is built in. Overnight stops may vary from those suggested and on occasions alternative accommodation, of a similar standard to that named below, will be used.

Tour Guide

Our guides are a key strength, chosen for their knowledge of and passion for the areas in which they work. All of our guides are carefully hand-picked, and are not just passing through these countries, but are usually locally born. Unlike some companies it should be noted we do not send a guide or tour leader from Undiscovered Destinations in the UK as we have every confidence in our locally appointed representative who is responsible for operating the tour on our behalf. Where possible you will have the same guide throughout your trip but on occasions it may be necessary to change the guide at one or more points during the tour, especially where more than one country is involved. Small group sizes of 3 or less will have a driver and different local guides in different locations.

Itinerary

Day 1 – Vientiane

Arrive in Vientiane and transfer to the hotel where the rest of the day will be at leisure. Overnight Khamvongsa Hotel or similar. No meals.

Vientiane

This delightfully friendly capital, studded with crumbling French mansions, bougainvillea--blooming streets and steaming noodle stalls, is somewhere between a big town and a diminutive city; the kind of place you might find a Graham Greene protagonist. Its conveniently compact travellers' enclave is based around Nam Phu, the Mekong riverside and Setthariat and Samsenthai streets. Full of things to see, from Buddha Park to the morning market and an impossibly rich selection of international cuisine – most pointedly French – you'll find yourself slowly won over by the easy charms of this evolving backwater. The city may reveal its beauty less readily than Luang Prabang, but spend a few days visiting its unusual sights, sampling its excellent food and enjoying a Beer Lao at sunset by the river, and you'll soon feel at home.

Day 2 – Vientiane

After breakfast, visit some of the important sites of Vientiane's past and present including Wat Sisaket, Wat Ho Pha Kheo, Patouxai, the Lao Victory Monument and Wat That Luang - the most sacred structure in all of Laos and if time allows Wat Si Muang where we can observe local people making their wishes. Visit the





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COPE Visitor Centre for a moving insight into the Secret War which left Laos as the most heavily bombed country in history. This afternoon is all about food where we stroll through the market and taste traditional Lao coffee and other local snacks. We shall also see how traditional Kao Piak (noodle soup) and papaya salad are made, staple dishes in Laos. Finally today we take a drive alongside the fabled Mekong River and enjoy a cold Beer-Lao as the sunsets. Overnight at Khamvongsa Hotel or similar (BL)

Day 3 - Vientiane – Luang Namtha

Enjoy a little leisure time this morning before taking an internal flight to Luang Namtha, the most ethnically diverse region in Laos. The rest of the day involves experiencing the cultural diversity of the region, visiting villages of tribes such as the Akha, Hmong, Khmu and Lanten people. During the day, interact and observe their traditional customs and practices. After sunset as the distant mountain ridges form layered silhouettes, enjoy a visit to the exotic night market. Overnight at Zuela Guesthouse or similar (B)

Day 4 - Luang Namtha and the Lanten people

This morning, take a short drive out to a Lanten village in the jungle (approx. 15 minutes). Take an easy grade jungle walk (approx. 2 hours) deeper into the forest and on the way it may be possible to observe some of the colourful tropical forest birds and if lucky perhaps also some wildlife. During the walk, the guide will share his experience to explain traditional medicine, animal tracks, edible leaves and other things of interest. A Lao style picnic lunch will be served at Nam Dee Waterfall before visiting a traditional Lanten home in Nam Dee village to observe local people practicing activities such as traditional weaving and bamboo paper making. Overnight Zuela Guesthouse or similar (BL)

Day 5 - Luang Namtha – Huay Xai

This morning transfer to a local village known for their traditional weaving and handicrafts. Enjoy a demonstration in this ancient Lao trade and try your own hand at it! After lunch in town, travel to Huay Xa (approx. 4.5-hour drive) located on the banks of the Mekong River. Drive through the Nam Ha National Park, one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in Laos. Stop along the way to experience the sights and sounds of the jungle. Upon arrival in Huay Xai the rest of the day is at leisure. Overnight at Bokeo Guesthouse or similar (BL)

Day 6 – Le Grand Pakbeng Cruise

After breakfast, transfer to the local pier and commence cruising around 09:30am down the mighty Mekong River to Pakbeng (approx. 6.5 hours cruising time in total). After around an hour on the river, we stop at a traditional riverside village to take a chance to observe rural life alongside the Mekong. A Lao buffet lunch is served on board before a leisurely afternoon awaits, enjoying the magnificent scenery and nature of the Mekong as you cruise along. Disembark before sunset to the lodge near Pakbeng and this evening enjoy local Lao cuisine on the open-air terrace overlooking the Mekong. Overnight at Le Grand Pakbeng Resort or similar (BLD)

Day 7 – Le Grand Pakbeng Cruise – Luang Prabang

After breakfast we continue the second leg of our cruise downstream and pass areas of unspoilt forest with little villages along the riverbanks, and perhaps the odd elephant or two with his mahout. We visit a Hmong village and have the opportunity to explore the local villages and old temples. Lunch is served on board as we enjoy the slow-paced cruise. After lunch we stop and visit the Pak-Ou Caves, an ancient pilgrimage site and containing thousands of gold lacquered Buddha images left there over hundreds of years. After the day on the river we arrive at Luang Prabang the former royal capital of Laos. Upon arrival you will be picked up and transferred to your hotel. This evening we enjoy a delicious dinner in the renowned Mande De Laos. Overnight at Maison Dalabua or similar (BLD)



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Luang Prabang

Colour is the first of Luang Prabang's virtues to greet travellers. Pearly frangipanis with their heady perfume, banks of overgrown trees peppered with scarlet flowers, the burnt sienna robes of hundreds of monks and their novices, and resplendent gold and claret wats. The scent of fresh coffee, river activity, produce markets and spicy food soon follows. And then the broader aesthetics begin to unfold. Encircled by mountains, and set 700m above sea level at the confluence of the Nam Khan (Khan River) and the Mekong River, Luang Prabang is Laos' foremost showpiece. The brew of gleaming temple roofs, crumbling French provincial architecture and multi-ethnic inhabitants captivates even the most jaded travellers, and the quiet benevolence of the city's residents lulls them into somnambulant bliss.

Day 8 - Luang Prabang

This morning, travel the short distance to the impressive falls of Kuang Si (approx. 45-minute drive). Relax around the cascades and idyllic pools and feel free to take a refreshing dip if you wish. A picnic lunch will be served close to the falls. Later visit the nearby Sunbear Refuge to learn more about the poaching and conservation efforts of these endangered creatures. On the way back to the town, visit the Buffalo Dairy Farm, known for their sustainable approach to local farming. Overnight at Maison Dalabua or similar (BL)

Day 9 - Luang Prabang

Today is all about immersing in the wonderful world of Lao food. Start by visiting a local fresh food market where our local guide will explain the local produce on show. Continue by across the Mekong to the family home of our local guide where you will be greeted by friendly villagers and go on to experience a simple private cooking lesson in the family home with local specialities. After lunch, cruise back down river to Luang Prabang enjoy the views of river life whilst sipping on a refreshing drink or two. Later this afternoon, experience a private Baci ceremony at the small village of Ban Mano. These gentle villagers led by their Nai Ban (village chief) offer visitors tidings of good luck and fortune for their life and travels by gently tying cotton cords symbolizing luck, friendship and good health around your wrists. The Baci ceremony will be held at a private family home. Afterwards, continue to a hidden temple rarely visited by foreign travellers and have a special encounter with the monks who will teach you the fundamentals of meditation. Overnight at Maison Dalabua or similar (BL)

Day 10 - Luang Prabang – Pakse – Wat Phou – Champasak

For early risers, witness the sacred ritual of monks on their alms rounds, known locally as Sai Bath. Long lines of barefoot monks go through the streets to receive their morning rice from the local villagers. After breakfast, transfer to the airport for your direct flight to Pakse. On arrival, visit travel to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Wat Phou by car (approx. 1 hour drive). Continue to Champasak Town, cross the Mekong by private boat to Don Deang Island where your hotel is located and catch the sunset over the mystical mountains surrounding Wat Phou from your terrace. Overnight at La Folie Lodge, or similar (BL)

Wat Phou

Recorded on the UNESCO World Heritage List, Wat Phou with its atmosphere is a pre-angkorian temples built upon three levels. When the temple has been erected, it was the most important economic and political centre in the region. The lower level is focused on the baray (water reservoir) and the promenade to join the second level with the galleries and the quadrangular pavilions. The upper level is the sanctuary itself.

Note - In keeping with our respectful stance regarding local cultures, please observe this sacred ritual from a respectful distance. If you take photographs, do not use a flash and try not to let this interfere with this highly revered ritual.



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Day 11 - Champasak – Bolaven Plateau

An early start today around 8am and transfer to the Bolaven Plateau (approx. 2 hours). On arrival in Paksong, enjoy a cup of local coffee at Jhai Café, the world's first completely philanthropic coffee roaster & café, located at source. We then continue by jeep on an exciting journey through along the backroads of the Bolaven and marvel at the spectacular highland scenery formed from an ancient super volcano. After a short (and bumpy) ride you will arrive at Mystic Mountain Coffee and meet Mr. Khamzone (just Kham is fine also) – for a masterclass on Bolaven coffee. Kham has been running his coffee plantation for 17 years. Enjoy a tour of the plantation followed by a coffee roasting demonstration. Continue to the secluded Tad Moun waterfall where you can take a dip in the crystal-clear water and enjoy a picnic lunch of authentic Laotian food close to the falls. Overnight at Sabaidee Valley Resort or similar (BL)

Day 12 - Champasak – Bolaven Plateau

This morning take easy trek to the inactive volcano of Dan Xinxay, one of many volcanoes on the plateau. After the trek, continue to Tad Champee waterfall and enjoy the opportunity to relax or swim and enjoy a picnic lunch of Lao specialities. After lunch, continue to Tad Fan waterfall which plunges impressively more than 100 metres into a jungle gorge. The final stop today is the more intimate falls of Tad Yueng. Overnight Sabaidee Valley Resort or similar (BL)

Note – for those that do not wish to do the morning trek, then you can just visit the Tad Fan and Tad Yueng falls in the afternoon and the morning at leisure.

Day 13 - Bolaven Plateau – 4000 Islands

After breakfast, travel to the mystical 4000 Islands (approx. 3.5 hours), a one-of-a-kind river Archipelago where the Mekong River spreads out over a width of 14km. Take a short boat ride through these enchanting islands and feel the sense of tranquillity that makes this place so special. Arrive at Don Khone Island and the rest of the day will be at leisure to relax by the pool and immerse in the peaceful atmosphere. Overnight at Senghaloune Resort or similar (BL)

Day 14 - 4000 Islands

This morning you have the choice of some gentle cycling passing by the rice fields and friendly villages of the islands or to explore the islands by Tuk Tuk. This afternoon, join one of the local fishermen to experience the 4000 Islands from the local perspective. Board one of the wooden boats and head out to the fishing-grounds, equipped with nets which you can try throwing out into the water and try your luck at a catch. At dusk continue to a secluded spot where we enjoy the idyllic scene and enjoy a delicious BBQ and listen to local myths from your guide. Overnight at Senghaloune Resort or similar (BD)

Day 15 - 4000 Islands – Pakse

After breakfast, take a short boat ride through the 4000 Islands to Nakasong Pier and continue to Pakse, en route visiting Kon Phapheng Waterfall, the largest waterfall by volume in Asia where the entire Mekong River descends downwards making for a truly amazing spectacle. Finally a drive of around 3 hours will take us to Pakse for an overnight stay, Overnight Athena Hotel or similar (B)

Day 16 - Pakse Departure

Transfer to the airport for your departure flight (B)



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Tour Inclusions/Exclusions

Inclusions:

Arrival and departure transfers
All accommodation
Services of English-speaking guide / tour leader (please note local 'station guides' will be used for each location when the group size is less than 3 travellers. The same guide/tour leader will be used throughout when the group is 4 or more travellers)
Meals as listed (B – Breakfast, L – Lunch, D – Dinner)
Transport, including travel by minivan, river and domestic flight
Luang Say Cruise (join-in cruise)
Entrance fees for sites listed as part of the itinerary

Excluded:

International flights
Any airport taxes (included for flights within the itinerary)
Travel Insurance
Visas
Drinks

Important Information

Foreign Government Travel Warnings

We constantly monitor the advice posted by the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In particular we will always advise clients of any travel warnings. At present there are no warnings against travel to any of the areas we visit in Laos. It should be noted that this information applies to British citizens. Other nationals are asked to check the current position of their respective government.

Accommodation and Meals

Hotel Check-in Times

As a general rule most hotels will allow guests to check-in from 2pm. Please note that the price of your tour does not include guaranteed early check-in. Therefore please advise us if you would like to ensure that your room is available for an earlier arrival. This is particularly relevant on the first day of the tour and for early morning arrivals. One option is to pre-book and pay for an extra night at the beginning of your tour which will guarantee your accommodation is available irrespective of what time you arrive. Please contact us for information and costs.

It should also be noted that on many of our tours we have set-aside Day 1 of the itinerary as an 'arrival day'. For this reason and because tour participants are likely to be arriving at different times, and often from different countries, guided sightseeing or other activities are not included. If you are arriving early or before the start date of the tour and would like to organise some extra arrangements on a private basis please contact us.

Accommodation Rating

At Undiscovered Destinations we know our travellers prefer to stay in comfortable, mid-range accommodation. Rooms on this tour usually come with private bathroom except on the jungle trip and also in



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the local homestay in Cambodia. When necessary air-conditioning will be provided. In general you will find your hotel has a restaurant and/or bar. Some smaller guesthouses, homestays and the ecolodge will not have such facilities.

We welcome solo travellers and single rooms will be allocated subject to the applicable tour supplement. Please note that on occasions you may not always be allocated a double or twin room, as some hotels have designated single rooms. These may be smaller in size. However, the supplement payable takes this into consideration.

Food & Drink

The daily meal basis is shown in the tour itinerary; breakfast (B), lunch (L) and dinner (D). Please note that lunch may be a picnic. Drinks are not included and will be payable locally in cash.

Dietary Requirements

If you have any special dietary requirements you must notify us at the time of booking. While we will make every effort to cater for you, we cannot guarantee that this will be possible.

Budgeting for your Tour

You will need some extra money to cover meals and drinks not included in the tour price, any optional sightseeing, souvenirs and items of a personal nature such as laundry.

Food

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch £2-£4

Dinner £6

Drink

The prices for drinks can vary greatly depending upon location and the prices detailed below are an average guide. In general you would expect that drinks purchased in a supermarket or local bar to be less expensive, whilst drinks in an upmarket bar or restaurant may be more expensive.

Water £0.75-£1.50

Beer £0.75

Tipping – Guide and Drivers

Tipping is common practice in Asia. If your local guide has been helpful then you could think about tipping. As a rough guide, drivers can be tipped between \$2-4 per day and guides between \$7-15 per day – these figures are per group, not per person.

Foreign Exchange

ATM Availability: There is a reasonable network of ATMs across the region in larger towns and cities which accept internationally issued cards. In rural Northern Laos ATM machines are not readily available

Credit and Debit Card Acceptance: Larger hotels take Visa or Mastercard

Local Currency: Lao kip (LAK)

Recommended Currency for Exchange: US Dollar (Note that torn and old US dollar notes are not generally accepted in Laos)

Where to Exchange: Your guide will advise you



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Joining your Tour

Flight Information

You are able to book this tour on a 'land only' basis or as a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Joining Tour Abroad

Customers booked on the 'Land Only' arrangements will receive an airport transfer, both on arrival and departure include in the tour price. In order that the transfer can be arranged please ensure that you advise us of your flight information once available. Please advise the date, time and flight number for your arrival/departure. If we have not been advised of this information at least 2 weeks before travel, then you will be required to make your own way to the hotel on Day 1 of your tour.

Travel Insurance

It is a condition of booking with Undiscovered Destinations that you have adequate valid travel insurance. It is your responsibility to arrange appropriate travel insurance and ensure you have read and understood the full terms and conditions of your travel insurance policy to ensure that you are covered for all activities you intend to undertake whilst on the tour, including all optional activities. Your Insurance Policy must fully cover you for medical expenses and emergency repatriation to your home country and be valid for the entire duration of your holiday.

Visa Information

At the time of writing British, US and Australian nationals require a visa for a tourist visit to Laos. For further details please visit the applicable website shown below.

British Nationals - www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

US Nationals - <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html>

Australian Nationals - www.smartraveller.gov.au/

Other nationals should check the latest requirements with the authorities in their home country, or with the destination's nearest embassy or consulate.

Should you require any documentation to support a visa application, such as a letter of invitation, upon request this will be provided by Undiscovered Destinations after receipt of your balance payment.

As it is the travellers' responsibility to ensure that they meet all entry requirements it is essential that you check the rules and any other conditions at the time of booking and again when making your balance payment. In addition, we would strongly advise that you make a final check around two weeks before your arrival. This is important as requirements can change at short notice. Undiscovered Destinations, when possible, will provide guidance about entry rules, but in the first instance please contact the relevant authorities, including the applicable embassy or consulate for assistance.

Passports

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a full passport, valid for at least six months after the date of return to the UK.

We strongly advise that your passport contains a minimum of two blank pages for each country visited, as this may be a requirement of the local immigration authorities. In addition certain countries will stipulate that the two blank pages are opposite each other. If you are unable to meet these requirements you may be refused boarding by your airline or denied entry by the immigration authorities.



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For specific information about the requirements for your destination please check with the country's embassy or consulate. Alternatively UK citizens can visit www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

Vaccinations & Protection

As with travel to most parts of Asia, we strongly recommend that you contact your doctor's surgery or a specialist travel clinic for up-to-date information, advice and the necessary vaccinations.

For a visit of less than one month, almost certainly you will be advised to have immunisations against the following: Diphtheria and Tetanus, Hepatitis A, Typhoid, Meningitis. Anti-malaria medication will also be required and the use of a DEET-containing insect repellent is highly recommended.

The legal status and regulation of some medicines prescribed or purchased in your home country can be different in other countries. If you're travelling with prescription or over-the-counter medicine, read this guidance from NaTHNaC on best practice when travelling with medicines. For further information on the legal status of a specific medicine, you'll need to contact the embassy, high commission or consulate of the country or territory you're travelling to.

Preparing for your tour

Climate

Laos has a tropical monsoon climate with two distinct seasons: May to October is the rainy season and November to April is the dry season. It gets hottest in March and April when temperatures can reach as high as 38C/100F. The lowest temperatures, usually in December, are around 15C/59F. The average temperature is between 25C/77F and 30C/84F. Please note that in the mountain areas in Northern Laos in the dry season it can be cold at night and first thing in the morning so please prepare accordingly.

Maximum daily temperatures range from the high 20°C in January to more than 40°C in April. Daily minimum temperatures are usually no less than 15° C except in the mountain areas in north Laos where temperatures can be lower than this.

Most people will want to travel during the dry season, with November to February being the peak tourist period, but we believe there is a lot to be said for travelling off season. If travellers visit between July - September, although there is a chance it will rain (likely only once per day and for a short time), the country will be at its greenest and even in the more touristy places (Luang Prabang etc.) there will be far fewer visitors, making it a much more authentic experience.

Clothing

When it comes to clothing it is usually recommended that lighter clothes are worn through the day, and warmer ones at night. The temperature can be cold at night, especially from November to February, so please bring some warm clothing with you. A hat is also advised to be worn through the day to protect from the sun, along with at least one piece of waterproof clothing for any days that the weather may be wet or windy.

Equipment

The first thing on your list should be a first aid kit. Whilst there is no undue cause for alarm, travellers are best advised to travel well-prepared: adequately immunized, with sufficient supplies of prescription drugs, along with a medical kit. Suncream/sunblock is a must. Insect repellent, including a bite spray will also be useful to have. Please bring a torch or head torch for this tour as electricity outages can occur and it will be of assistance in dimly lit areas, especially on the trip up the Nam Nern into the jungle.



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Footwear

Comfortable and sturdy walking shoes are recommended. When travelling lighter sandals are a good option.

Luggage on tour

Your luggage should not exceed 20kgs (44lbs). One large rucksack or soft type bag, and one small hand luggage rucksack is acceptable.

Electric Supply & Plugs

Electrical supply is 220V and plugs generally have two-prong round or flat pins.

Tour Itinerary Versions

Please ensure that you have an up-to-date copy of these tour notes immediately before you travel, as from time to time our itineraries may be amended, either for operational reasons or in response to feedback from customers. You will be informed of any major changes to your tour but small changes may just be added to these tour notes. These tour notes were updated 20 October 2023.

