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Haven Report



Vientiane, Laos:
A Delightfully Laid-Back Destination...



Vientiane, Laos...The Laid-Back Southeast Asian Capital City

By Wendy Justice

There is a saying in Asia that the Vietnamese plant the rice, the Cambodians harvest the rice, the Thais sell the rice, and the Laotians listen to the rice grow. It seems as if everyone who visits delightfully laid-back Laos falls in love with the place. Laos exudes “mellow.” While the rest of Southeast Asia seems to be changing and modernizing at break-neck speed, Laos ambles along, taking plenty of breaks along the way. When you fly into Vientiane from industrious Vietnam or busy Thailand, it’s easy to mistake the day of your arrival for a national holiday. Chances are you

have not arrived on a special day. This is Vientiane – the most relaxed capital city in Asia. Although Vientiane has perked up a bit in the past few years, businesses still shut down around mid-day, when the city closes her eyes for a few hours. Weekends are quiet, when many places close their doors, and weekends in Laos may last well into the next week – no one is in a hurry and almost anyone will take the time to chat with you.

Laos is one of the least industrialized countries in the world. Towns are few and far between. There are few paved

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roads and even fewer bridges – a detour of a 100 miles, in lieu of one well-placed bridge, is common here. Even the largest city in the country, the capital of Vientiane, feels like little more than a large town. With a population of about 740,000, including the surrounding suburbs, you'll find no skyscrapers here, no global stockexchange (a Laotian stock-exchange did open this year for the first time in history – it has a grand total of two stock listings!), no malls or hustle and bustle, and no need to keep a tuxedo or formal gown in your closet. In Laos, U.S. dollars, Thai baht, Chinese yuan and Vietnamese dong spend equally well, with Laotian kip being the least popular or useful of the common currencies. Until recently, the largest Laotian bill in circulation was worth about one U.S. dollar. Since people didn't want to carry duffel bags full of cash, it just seemed easier to use higher value currencies from other countries, rather than going to the effort and expense of designing and printing up largedenomination bills. More time, that way, to listen to the rice grow...

This is not to say that Laotians are lazy – they're not. They are a practical people with a different set of priorities than their more "industrious" neighbors. Kindness is more important than competition; fun more important than finance; harmony more important than willfulness. Life moves with the rhythm of the day and the seasons rather than the rigid strictures of the business cycle.

Given the agrarian nature of the country, Vientiane is a town of surprising worldly grace. Due in part to the large presence of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) in the city, as well as being one of the only urban areas in the entire country,

Vientiane has a lot to offer. There are outstandingly beautiful Buddhist temples, lively markets, frequent festivals and celebrations, and a fine assortment of local and international cuisines. In the city a scattering of older French-colonial buildings still stand, a reminder of a time not so long ago when Laos was a French colony.

For those looking for a truly rewarding and unique retirement, Vientiane and its surroundings have a lot to offer. Nestled in the nearby mountains, beautiful waterfalls, venerable temples, exotic wildlife, and remote hill-tribe villages await those who have come to Laos with the luxury of time to explore the less-traveled reaches of this area. Go now – before Laos experiences the boom that is engulfing the rest of Southeast Asia.



Lying at the crossroads of S.E. Asia

A Pawn At The Crossroads Of Empires

The Vientiane region has been settled for over a thousand years. Descendants of the Tai people who migrated south and west from China, and the Mon who migrated eastward through Burma from India, settled in the area, gradually assimilating or displacing the hunter-gatherer tribes and small fiefdoms that came before them. The rich alluvial plains along the banks of the Mekong River lent themselves well to farming, and the river itself was a rich fishery



© David Justice

Shhh... and you'll hear it growing

and conduit for trade. Political control of this fertile area shifted frequently between the more powerful Burmese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Siamese (Thai) kingdoms.

Candapuri, the earliest known name for what is now the capital city of Vientiane, was founded sometime in the 8th century as a minor Mon kingdom. The location, at which the symbolic and spiritual center of the Lao nation - the golden stupa Phra That Luang - was later built, may have originally been the religious center of this Mon kingdom. Archeological evidence of the earliest city walls has been found near this site.



Cascading roofs of a Lao-style wat

Laos traces its first recorded history, and the roots of its national identity, to the emergence in 1353 of the Kingdom of Lan Xang – the “land of a million elephants.” Under the rule of King Fa Ngum, and with the initial support of the Cambodian Khmer Empire, this mighty and prosperous kingdom controlled much of what is now Thailand and Laos. Successive kings of this dynasty, especially King Setthathirat in the 16th century, helped establish Theravada Buddhism as the predominant religion and philosophy of the country.

In response to repeated attacks from the Burmese, King Setthathirat moved the capital of Lan Xang from the northern Laotian city of Luang Prabang to the more easily defended

city of Vientiane. Several beautiful Buddhist temples, or wats, were built during this period, and Vientiane became a center of Buddhist learning. This illustrious time didn't last long, though. Invasions by the Chinese, Burmese, and Siamese took their toll on the region, and it wasn't until 1805, when the Siamese installed Chao Anou, a Lao prince who had been educated in Bangkok, that the city received a much-needed renovation. Chao Anou built several public works during his reign including Wat Si Saket, which was built in 1815 and is still in use today.

Chao Anou may have been appointed by the Siamese, but the Siamese had no intention of giving any sort of independence to him or to the region. In a bid for autonomy, Chao Anou's army rebelled against the Siamese. The rebellion was crushed by the Siamese in 1828 in one of the most violent battles of Vientiane's history. The Siamese razed the city and took away most of the population. Wat Si Saket was the only building that survived the attack, and the city was abandoned for many years.



King Fa Ngum leading his people on

The French came to Laos in 1867 and named Luang Prabang as their capital. In 1900, however, they moved their administrative offices to what was then known as Vieng Chan, which they spelled “Vientiane.” The French built for their own needs, but didn't put a lot of effort into “civilizing” the

city. Unlike the French colonial rule in Vietnam, no railways were built, no universities established, and few improvements were made. The French built a mansion for their governor at the site of the former royal palace, and constructed a prison and courthouse, a hospital, some schools, and housing for interpreters and administrators, many of whom were Vietnamese. As the French and Vietnamese took over Vientiane, many Laotians were pushed out of the area, and the town grew slowly.

As recently as 1928, Vientiane had a population of only 9,000 inhabitants. The French attempted several schemes for economic development – timber, coffee, and opium cultivation were encouraged. Even so, Laos remained an economic backwater for the French. When the Great Depression occurred, many plans that the French had hoped to develop had to fall by the wayside. The Siamese saw an opportunity to regain the territory they lost when France colonized the area, and it looked likely that Laos would again become a vassal state of Siam. Before the Siamese could act, however, the Second World War intervened. France had bigger problems than attempting to develop and exploit a country thousands of miles away as they struggled with their own German occupation. The Japanese briefly controlled all of French Indochina, including Siam and Laos. After Japan's surrender in 1946, Laos was returned to the French administration. In 1949, the French granted partial independence to Laos, hoping to waylay Siam's renewed plans to take over the country.

Torn Between Two Ideologies

Real growth didn't come to Vientiane until after the Second World War, when Cold War dollars and foreign advisers began to relocate to the area. In 1953, the French granted full independence to Laos, and for the first time in its tumultuous history, Laos became an independent nation. Less than a year later, France ceded control of Vietnam, and withdrew entirely from Indochina. Yet peace did not last for long. Mao Tse Tung and the People's Liberation Army were victorious in China in 1949, and by the early 1950s a large communist movement had developed in Vietnam. By 1951, with support from China, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam, communist Pathet Lao leaders



Time stands still

gained considerable influence in Laos and in 1955, the Marxist Lao People's Party was formed.

The United States worked hard to prevent a communist takeover of Laos. Between 1955 and 1958, it spent US\$120 million on the country, making Laos almost totally dependent on U.S. aid. Yet in 1958 Laos made the decision to include Pathet Lao ministers in the government, and the US withheld its aid, plunging Laos into a deep financial and political crisis. Although Laos had professed neutrality in 1960, with the collapse of the economy and the failure of several coalition governments, they soon faced a civil war. Geneva conferences held in 1961 and 1962 established Laos as a neutral, autonomous nation. But with increased pressure from both the United States and Soviet-backed Vietnam, the troubled new country found itself torn between ideologies and intense political pressures. With guerrilla warfare in the east and ideological warfare in the west, weak and fractured Laos soon found itself a pawn in the war between the United States and Vietnam.

In 1964, heavy US-led bombing of Laos began in the area of the Plain of Jars and along the length of the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail in the far eastern part of the country. For nine years, an average of US\$2 million worth of bombs fell daily in Laos, giving it the dubious distinction of being the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world – a title that it holds to this day. Vientiane during the time of the second Indochina War (the "Vietnam War") was a tumultuous town full of intrigue and shifting fortunes. There were coups and counter-coups, spies, military personnel, and ideologues from



a case of “too little, too late.” As the economies of other Southeast Asian countries soared, Laos languished. Today, Laos is the least developed and poorest country in Asia. There is little visible foreign business investment. Due to rampant corruption, Laos is considered to be one of the most difficult countries in the world in which to do business. The country remains very dependent on foreign aid – 8.5% of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comes from foreign donors.

Cute and curious...but disadvantaged

many factions. Correspondents, war profiteers, and black marketers were drawn to the city as well as those who made their living satisfying their vices. The fledgling Lao government - deeply divided and at war with itself - was largely corrupt and ineffectual. In April 1975, Vietnam and Cambodia fell to communist forces. A few months later in Laos, the Pathet Lao declared victory. They consolidated their power, named Vientiane as their capital and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was formed.

Laos today still has the lowest population density of any Southeast Asian nation.

With few jobs (the unemployment rate is 2.6%), and an economy and lifestyle that is still primarily agrarian, there is little incentive for rural people to relocate to the cities, although this is occurring slowly. Only a third of the not-quite six million people of Laos live in urban areas, with the remainder living along rivers away from the Mekong or in the rural mountain areas. 26% of the population lives in poverty.

Languishing Laos Shows Shoots Of Activity

In Vientiane, things changed immediately after the end of the war. The bars were closed down, and the area became off-limits to spies and journalists. The economy collapsed further, and thousands of refugees who had aided the United States fled the country – roughly 10% of the total population. Some ethnic minorities, such as the Hmong, continued to resist communist control, engaging in an insurgency that lasted for another 30 years. Up until 1986, Laos had fashioned its economy on the Soviet model, but that was abandoned when farmers were again permitted to own land and various much-needed economic reforms were initiated. By the early 1990s, foreign direct investment began to have an impact. In some ways, though, it was

Although officially still considered a communist country, it has little meaning here any longer. The economy is definitely free-market, and the government is enacting economic reforms in an attempt to attract foreign investment. Laos has a “special relationship” with Vietnam to the east, and maintains close ties with China to the north. China has begun to invest huge



Shopping and healthcare across River Mekong in Thailand

amounts of capital into Laos, building roads and improving infrastructure, in exchange for unlimited access to Laos' vast timber resources. Australia has a growing presence in Laos' mining sector, and Thailand and Laos are participating together in many projects including a controversial hydroelectric dam along the Mekong River. In 2004, Laos and the United States normalized trade relations and Laos is taking the first steps towards their goal of eventual membership in the World Trade Organization.

A Little Geography

Vientiane is located in the central part of western Laos. Built along the banks of the mighty Mekong River, Vientiane gazes south across the water to her more developed neighbor, Thailand. Mountains and plateaus cover about 70% of Laos, including the areas surrounding Vientiane. As a result, there is an abundance of outdoor activities and spectacular scenery all around this area.

Ecologically, Laos remains one of the last frontiers of Southeast Asia. Although large swaths of jungle have been stripped for timber, it is still very possible to find yourself deep within the heart of a thick forest, surrounded by primeval ferns and abundant wildlife. Laos was once known as "the land of a million elephants," and even today, it's still the home of the largest population of Asiatic elephants in the world – about 2,000 remain, of which around 800 are untamed and wild. Various NGOs have been actively helping the elephants in an attempt to ensure their survival.

Along with elephants, the surrounding jungles and mountains support a wide variety of wildlife. Monkeys and gibbons are abundant, as well as pangolins (a relative of the anteater), civets, tigers, leopards, and bears. With so much rapid development occurring in Asia, Laos remains to a large degree a sanctuary, with huge tracts of virgin forest and unpopulated land. Over 14% of all the land in Laos has a protected status, with 20 National Biodiversity Conservation Areas and four Provincial Protected Areas. This makes Laos one of the most ecologically protected countries on Earth.



Waiting patiently for his next customer

There are several attractive parks and waterfalls within an easy day-trip from Vientiane. The Phu Khao Khuay National Protected Area has a herd of about 40 wild elephants, and an impressive array of other endangered species. Several spectacular waterfalls grace this forest sanctuary.

About four hours north of Vientiane, the scenery changes from the broad Mekong lowland valleys to rugged limestone karst mountains, laced with wet and undeveloped caves. There are white-water rafting opportunities along the Nam Song River, as well as laid-back tubing along the mellower stretches. There's a lot of exploring to do around here. From winding mountain roads with awesome scenic views to trips into the beautiful rural countryside, this is truly an area not to be missed. The scenery is incredible and it's well-worth taking the time to explore this region.

Thanks to foreign donors, roads have improved in recent years, but Laos is still very much a developing country. In some cases, it is far faster – and more comfortable – to travel by boat rather than car or motorbike. Cargo and passenger boats ply the waters of the Mekong and its tributaries, offering passage to towns and villages along the rivers.

Most of the area surrounding Vientiane is rugged and sparsely populated. With your own motorbike or four-wheel drive, there are endless opportunities for exploration. Motorbikes and bicycles are also available for rent in many Laotian towns, so a combination of bus, bike, and boat is an ideal way to explore the country. The Laotian people tend to be exceptionally



© David Justice

Karst mountains towering over mellow rivers

friendly, and foreigners are welcome just about everywhere. Try sleeping in a treehouse high in the jungle canopy, with the haunting songs of the gibbons to keep you company. Trek to remote villages beyond the roads and experience the unique and ancient lifestyles of the hill people. Discover beautiful, elegant Buddhist wats – often the center of the village, a place of both social and spiritual gatherings. Wherever you go in Laos, you are sure to experience the unusual.

Strolling Around Town

Few people would ever head to Vientiane for the urban activities – there simply aren't many. A typical evening might be spent strolling or meeting some friends for dinner and drinks, or watching life along the Mekong River. Vientiane has a large expat population that makes socializing easy, and the Lao people are usually quite open and easy to know. To get you started, the English-language daily newspaper, the [Vientiane Times](#), has listings of community activities and local events, as well as local and national news.

There are some public swimming pools, a couple of bowling alleys, a fitness center, a few social organizations, and sports clubs. Golfing aficionados will be pleased to know that there are several

country clubs with golf and driving ranges, including the Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort, which has an international-standard golf course as well as a 185-room hotel and casino. There are many night clubs and bars around town, which usually stay open until 1 a.m. Several of these cater to a primarily foreign crowd, especially those around Thanon Francois Nginn.

One of the highlights of Vientiane is visiting the many ornate wats, or Buddhist temples. Some of the most exquisite wats in all of Southeast Asia are located in Vientiane. There are dozens of these beautiful compounds

gracing the city, adorned with huge Buddha images gilded by the faithful in leaflets of micro-thin gold that glitter in the breeze. Serene monks dressed in flowing saffron-colored robes grace the courtyards. There are few places on earth more conducive to contemplation. Watch locals bowing before the altar with incense or shaking divination sticks to learn their fortune. Devotees will bring offerings to set on the altar, and monks may be sitting on the sides to give blessings. Temple bells chime in the breeze and ring out upon the occasion of important



Most facilities can be found in the city-center



A bright, colorful yet peaceful wat

blessings and prayers. Wats are very sensory places, and you don't have to be a Buddhist to feel good just being there.

The national monument in Vientiane - perhaps the most beautiful in all of Southeast Asia - is the massive stupa, Pha That Luang. This monument honors both the Buddhist religion in Laos and Lao sovereignty. Thought to contain the breastbone of Buddha, the pedestal of this shrine consists of a symbolically significant 120 gold-colored lotus petals, 30 smaller stupas rise above that, and in the center, a much taller stupa, in the shape of an elongated lotus bud, crowns the monument. From the base of the pedestal to the top of the center stupa, Pha That Luang measures 148 feet. Several huge and ornate temples and halls surround Pha That Luang. This is a "must-see" attraction in Vientiane.

About a mile back towards town from Pha That Luang is Vientiane's very own Arc de Triomphe. Built by Laos in a fanciful mix of Buddhist and Parisian styles, Patuxai has four huge archways, with stairs inside that access the top of the arch. At the top are five towers constructed in Laotian style that feature viewing galleries which provide panoramic views of the city. In typical Lao understatement, a plaque at the base of Patuxai reads, "From a closer distance, it appears even less impressive, like a monster of concrete." Attractive gardens and ponds lead to

and away from the arch – this is a nice spot to take a rest and people-watch.

Visiting Buddha Park is an enjoyable day-trip from Vientiane. Located about 14 miles south of Vientiane, this park is a little bit religious and definitely a bit corny, featuring dozens of bizarre concrete statues that combine concepts from both Buddhism and Hinduism. You can explore inside a large concrete globe, passing through three levels that are meant to symbolize hell, earth, and heaven... assuming that you can brave the treacherous concrete steps designed for little Asian feet. Buddha Park is located above the banks of the

Mekong in Xieng Khuan, a tiny little town that seems to have more cows than human residents.

There are a few museums in Vientiane, but collections are very limited. The Lao National Museum is the largest of these. There are some mildly interesting artifacts and political propaganda exhibits here, mainly signed in Laotian. There is often an Englishspeaking guide available to explain the exhibits to foreign visitors. On the day of our visit, we had to wake up the ticket seller to enter – apparently he was busy listening to the rice grow. There are dozens of places offering affordable therapeutic massage in Vientiane. About US\$4 to US\$6 will buy a full hour with a skilled Lao massage practitioner.



Pha That Luang – the sacred stupa

The French Center will occasionally show French films subtitled in English, or you can have your pick of inexpensive pirated DVDs, available throughout the city. If you don't want to buy a pirated DVD, you'll have to head to Thailand to find the genuine article, as Laos has no copyright laws and non-pirated DVDs are next to impossible to find. There are several language schools if you wish to learn Lao (see [Contacts](#) for more information) and a growing number of restaurants that offer instruction in Laotian cuisine. Finally, Vientiane is blessed with several good bookshops that sell new and used English language books at fair prices.



Lying at the crossroads of S.E. Asia

In some ways, being in Vientiane is like stepping back in time. Life is relatively uncomplicated. It is a peaceful city where relationships mean more than commerce. This is really the main attraction here. It's a social place where friends are easily made. Whether at the coffee shop, the riverfront, or at the market, life in Vientiane is friendly and relaxed. Vientiane is a quirky cosmopolitan city with a quaint village feel, and offers a lifestyle that has attracted a steadily growing number of foreign residents.

Tropical Wet-Tropical Dry

Vientiane has a tropical wet and dry climate. Consistently warm throughout the year, seasonal variations in the city are more in

terms of precipitation than in temperature. Average maximum daytime temperatures range between about 82 °F during the winter months to around 93 °F through the spring and summer seasons. Maximum temperatures during the hot season can occasionally reach into the 100s, but unlike much of tropical Asia, Vientiane tends to have relatively low humidity, so it doesn't feel as hot and sticky as other tropical areas.

Between October and April, Vientiane is quite dry, with an average of only about nine inches of rain for this entire period. However, May through September brings the monsoon season. During these five months, the average amount of precipitation is almost 57 inches.

October through February is the most comfortable time to be in Vientiane. There's very little rainfall and temperatures are at their mildest, frequently dipping into the mid-60s or lower in the evening.

Farmers in many rural areas of Laos and northern Thailand still practice the traditional "slash and burn" method of clearing their fields. As a result, near the end of the dry season in March, the air can become quite hot and smoky. If the idea of a monsoon or a smoky season doesn't sound like fun, you can leave for a few weeks and return when that season has passed. This part of the world has some amazing spots, and you'll have the perfect excuse to see some of them.

Health Issues

One of the downsides to living in a country that is not yet well-developed is the lack of advanced medical care. The French Embassy Medical Centre is probably your best choice in Vientiane. They provide basic care and limited emergency services, a family practice clinic, and a modern laboratory. For anything of a serious nature, Udon International Hospital has ambulances in Vientiane that can transport patients to Udon Thani, Thailand. Additionally, there are hospitals and good clinics directly across the river in Nong Khai, Thailand. This means that top-quality medical care is available to Vientiane residents within two hours of the city, as medical care in Thailand is very good.

The same is true for dental care. There are dental clinics throughout Vientiane, but foreigners living here say that they go to Thailand for their dental work. Both Nong Khai and Udon Thani have an abundance of fine dental clinics.

Pharmacies in Vientiane offer a full range of medications, and prescriptions are not required for most drugs. However, care should be taken if buying them in this city as counterfeit medications are common. As with medical and dental care, foreigners in Vientiane say that they head to Thailand to purchase medications. Prescriptions for anything other than narcotics are not required in Thailand. When buying medications in Thailand, we suggest using either hospital pharmacies or busy, well-established local pharmacies. When you purchase, check to see that the expiration date on the package is valid and that there is no evidence of tampering. In general, medications obtained in Thailand are genuine and very reasonably priced.



A 'busy' highway heading north

The Red Cross in Vientiane offers reliable immunization services. If you are considering living in Laos, we encourage you to consult with them, or your home doctor, about obtaining a comprehensive series of vaccinations.

Vientiane has an active mosquito abatement program and you should too. Use personal protection during times of increased mosquito activity. Malaria is not an issue in Vientiane, but, as in many urban areas of Southeast Asia, dengue fever is a concern. There is no vaccine or cure yet for dengue fever, so prevention is the best approach.

Due to the nature of medical care in Laos, we strongly recommend that you carry a traveler's health insurance policy that includes medical evacuation. Additionally, people with serious medical conditions or chronic diseases should carefully consider the limitations of health care in this area.

Getting To Vientiane

Located just two miles outside of the city center, Wattay International Airport is one of the few international airports in Laos. From here flights depart to Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Lao Airlines is the national carrier and handles domestic flights as well as some international flights. Given the road conditions and transportation infrastructure in some parts of the country, it can be quicker, cheaper and a lot

more comfortable to fly to your destination rather than to brave an overland route.

There are no direct flights to Laos from anywhere in Europe or the western hemisphere. From North America, the least expensive way to get to Vientiane would be to fly into Kuala Lumpur or Bangkok, then get a connecting flight to Vientiane through [Air Asia](#), the deep-discount airline based out of Kuala Lumpur. Air Asia now has flights from London and Paris, so travelers coming from Europe may be able to save some money by taking an Air Asia flight to Kuala Lumpur, and then a connecting flight from Kuala Lumpur to Vientiane. If traveling with Air Asia, booking far in advance is the key to finding promotional rates and getting the lowest fares.

There are several ways to cross the border overland between Vientiane and Thailand, which sits to the south, just across the Mekong River. There are direct, non-stop bus services from the border cities of Nong Khai, Udon Thani and from the northern provincial capital of Khon Kaen, Thailand, to Vientiane. There are also direct bus services to Vientiane from Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand, as well as from various cities in Vietnam – though it's a long bus ride.

The completion in 2009 of the First Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, which crosses the Mekong from Thailand into Laos, has opened the country, in a limited way, to rail travel. It is now possible for the rail aficionado to travel from as far away as Singapore to reach the outskirts of Vientiane. The well-developed railroad networks of Thailand and Malaysia may



All aboard... the next train departing from Vientiane...

WJ: Where do most foreigners live in Vientiane?

Tony: anywhere, most foreigners choose to live near the embassies. There are big trees and rice paddies nearby. There are many places very convenient to facilities, restaurants and so on. The international area around the embassies is nice but a little more expensive than homes in the countryside or in the older part of the city. Many foreigners, especially Europeans, prefer the traditional Lao style house, made with wood and high roofs.

make this an attractive option for some travelers. Thanaleng Railway Station, about 11 miles outside of Vientiane, is the terminus of this route, though plans are underway to extend railway service all the way into the city. Presently, taxis and tuk-tuks ferry passengers into the capital from the railway station.

WJ: Is it possible to purchase property or a home in Vientiane?

Construction of a rail line connecting Kunming, China to Vientiane – a distance of roughly 250 miles – is in the early planning stages, with an estimated completion date of **December 2021**. This will certainly have a profound effect on Laos, opening the way for trains that will run from China all the way to Singapore. Once this route is completed, the days of Laos being a remote and relatively inaccessible country will probably be over.

Tony: Under most conditions, foreigners can't legally buy property in Laos unless they have a Laotian business partner or are married to a Laotian national. If that is the case, the property must be put in the Laotian's name. But the laws are changing. At this time, a foreigner could buy land with a minimum investment of US\$500,000, but this is pretty much in theory only. It is not yet in common practice here and I wouldn't recommend being one of the first ones to test this new policy! However, the government is encouraging foreign investment and I think that it will not be much longer before foreigners will have the right to legally purchase property, in any price range, here and in their own name.

Wherever I Lay My Hat...

It is surprisingly easy to find housing in Vientiane.

There are a few property agents in Vientiane, and using their services is by far the easiest and most efficient way to view a wide variety of properties. I spoke with the owner of [RentsBuy](#), Mr. Houmphan (Tony) Saiyalath, to learn more about the rental market here, as well as the role of the property agent.



Wattay Airport...a helpful translation



Mr. Houmphon Tony Saiyalath

WJ: What are some average prices for rentals here?

Tony: The average two-bedroom house, either Western- or Laos-style, would run to around US\$400-US\$500 monthly. Older homes would be less, and top-end luxury homes would be over US\$1,000 a month. For a two-bedroom apartment, most cost between US\$500-US\$600 per month, though brand new ones may be closer to US\$800 per month. Apartments generally cost more because they usually include internet, laundry, cable TV, housekeeping twice a week, water and trash, and of course, they are fully furnished. Houses are typically either unfurnished or with very basic furnishings, and utilities are extra.

WJ: Do you have to pay a deposit? How does that normally work?

Tony: Most landlords like having rent paid one year in advance. If you pay in advance like this, there is usually no deposit. Some landlords will ask for six months in advance. It's all negotiable, of course. There are some apartments available on a month-to-month basis, but the rent will usually be higher.

WJ: If you have a place, how do you find a good housekeeper? Is there red-tape in hiring a housekeeper here?

If you rent a house and would like a housekeeper, you won't need to have a contract. The standard wage for an experienced

full-time housekeeper with references is US\$100-US\$150 per month. You generally find them through word-of-mouth. Most apartments include housekeeping twice weekly in the price of the rental. Your landlord should be able to recommend an honest and reliable fulltime housekeeper, since it is in his or her best interest, as well as yours, if the property is kept clean.

WJ: Do you know how many foreigners live in Vientiane? Where are they from, and what do they do?

Tony: A very rough estimate is that there are 10,000 foreigners living in Vientiane. I really don't know. There are quite a few. Many of them are Australian, as Australia has mining interests here. There are many NGOs that employ foreigners, as well as some major hydro-electric projects and the United Nations. Most foreigners here are working, either employed with NGOs or international firms. Others come here and volunteer. If you are working, you can get a long-term visa, even if you are working part-time. Some people volunteer for an hour or two per month and are able to get longer visas that way. It is often possible for a non-working foreigner to get a one-year business visa – there are some agencies here that can assist with that, but the visa process must be done within the country. Otherwise, a tourist visa is good for 30 days, and many people make monthly visa runs to Thailand. You can do this indefinitely, and it does not require an overnight stay in Thailand. There are many ways to stay long-term in Laos if that is what you want to do.

(Note: You can read more about staying long-term in Laos and the red tape [here](#).

WJ: Who pays the property agent – the renter or the landlord?

Tony: With my agency, the landlord pays the commission. I charge them one month's rent. My services are always free to the renter. I do my best to negotiate terms to everyone's satisfaction, and remain available to the renter and the landlord as needs arise.

You can view some of the many current rental listings by clicking on the link [here](#).

Getting Connected

If you rent an apartment or condominium, the landlord will manage most of your utilities. Generally, your utility fees will be included as a portion of your monthly rent. Exceptions are

phone charges from a land-line phone, if you have one, and electricity bills, which you would pay directly to the landlord. If you have a gas stove for cooking, you would be responsible for filling the tank as needed. The same is true for drinking water.

If you rent a house, the landlord will keep most utilities in his or her name, though you may need to set up some utilities on your own, such as Internet or cable television. Depending on the terms of your contract, you would still be responsible for paying the landlord for the monthly charges.

Most people use cellular phones rather than land-lines. They are economical and don't require a deposit or large installation fee. If you do want a land-line, you or your rental agent may be able to negotiate the activation charges with the landlord. There will be an initial set-up charge of 300,000 LAK, a monthly service charge of 15,000 LAK, and local phone charges billed at 200 LAK per minute. [Lao Telecom](#) is the state provider for land-line phone service, and they also offer cell phone and internet plans.

For prepaid or postpaid cell phone plans, you have several choices. M-Phone is the cell phone division of Lao Telecom, and they have several calling plans available. [Tigo Lao \(www.tigolao.com\)](#) also provides an assortment of cell phone plans. Local calls cost 847 LAK per minute during peak hours and 600 LAK per minute during nights and weekends, with reduced rates for calling other Tigo subscribers. International calls are billed at 2,000 LAK per minute. Uniphone is another competitive provider in the local cell phone market.

It costs less to use a VOIP service such as Skype or Google to make overseas calls if you have a reasonably good Internet connection.

Several companies provide Internet service in Vientiane. This is a relatively new industry here, and it is just now becoming competitive. Until recently, you would have had to pay around US\$150 per month for internet! [Planet Max](#) offers plans for unlimited home internet starting at 250,000 LAK per month (about US\$32, May 2011), with competitive plans from Lao Telecom, Tigo, and other providers also available.

The Practical Side Of Living In Vientiane

If you are in Laos with a 30-day tourist visa, you will not be able to open a local bank account. If you have a longer-stay visa, you could – but it might be better to consider other options. There

are good reasons for this, the most significant being that no one outside of Laos accepts the Laotian kip as legal currency. Even within Laos, many businesses and institutions, including the government, will insist on payment with either U.S. dollars or Thai baht. The kip is an unstable currency. Rents, whether for an apartment or for a hotel room, are almost always quoted in U.S. dollars. Practically any small transaction in Vientiane can be settled in baht, kip or dollars. It gets even more confusing as you travel north or east, where Chinese yuan and Vietnamese dong are also accepted currencies. Most foreigners here use a foreign bank – a Thai bank is the obvious choice from Vientiane, though you could manage your finances quite adequately using a bank in your home country and transferring money to a bank in Thailand if you need to make a large transaction. There are many ATMs in Vientiane, so accessing money for daily expenses using a debit or credit card is very convenient.

Unless you're an avid walker, you probably will want to consider having your own vehicle. Although there are inexpensive public buses in Vientiane, they aren't particularly clean or reliable, though they are usually packed to bursting with locals. Foreigners without their own transportation generally use tuk-tuks and jumbos – motorbikes that have been converted to breezy, noisy taxis, capable of seating two to six people on padded seats behind the driver. Fares are not fixed, and bargaining is necessary. If you are a foreigner, you can expect to be overcharged – it's just a matter of degree, and depends upon your bargaining skills. There are a few – very few – metered taxis in Vientiane. Getting a ride in one usually requires a phone call for a pick-up.

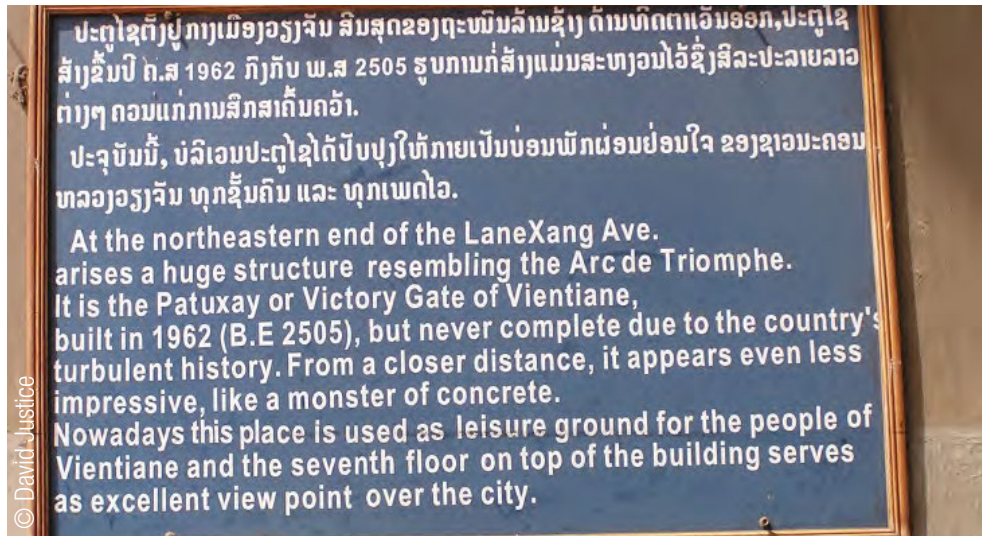
Many places throughout town rent motorbikes. For US\$5 to US\$7 per day (less per month), you can rent a small 100 cc or 150 cc motorbike which will get you around town perfectly well. You can also purchase a new or used motorbike – there are several dealerships selling new motorbikes, as well as bulletin boards advertising used ones. Helmets are required in Vientiane. Bicycles are another good way to get around town – there are few hills in the city, and drivers tend to be reasonably cautious around bicycles. When you rent or purchase a new or used automobile, an international driver's license and liability insurance is all you'll need to operate it.

Vehicle insurance is mandatory (although it is not enforced). Given the traffic, road conditions and general skill level of many drivers, a good policy is a very wise investment. [Toko Assurance](#) is one of the primary insurance companies doing business in

Laos. To insure a US\$2,000 motorbike for one year costs about US\$60, and comprehensive insurance for a US\$15,000 automobile costs about US\$420 per year. Roads are reasonably good in the city of Vientiane – most are paved and in good repair. Outside of Vientiane, conditions change in a hurry, and many drivers who choose a vehicle with four wheels, instead of two, have a pick-up truck or a four-wheel drive.

Tap water is not potable, though it is adequate for brushing your teeth, showering or washing vegetables prior to cooking them. Any restaurant in town will serve purified water, and food sanitation here seems to be surprisingly good. Restaurants will purchase bulk ice, made from purified water. More and more water treatment plants are being built, and before too many more years, the tap water in Vientiane will be treated. Electricity seems to be quite stable in the city, as is telephone and Internet accessibility.

Some businesses will be closed on Saturdays, and many are also closed on Sundays. Quite a few businesses will remain closed on Mondays too. By Tuesday, most places will be open for the remainder of the week. Keep in mind that many businesses close for lunch, which may last for two hours or longer, so it can be difficult to accomplish many errands between 11 am to 2 pm. However, many small businesses will



What a relief... the numbers are the same!

stay open well into the evening hours.

Vientiane has been laying the groundwork for its eventual development, and they do seem to be on the right track. Construction of a railroad that will connect Kunming, China to Vientiane has already begun, and this will have a profound impact for Laos in the coming years. For now, Vientiane remains a very traditional city in a country that has thus far retained her traditional culture – and that is certainly one of the most compelling reasons to spend time here now.

La Lingua Franca

Vientiane is a multilingual city. All schools give pupils a choice between learning English or French as a second language.

Although English is generally the preferred choice, the French influence is strong – a street in Vientiane is likely to be called rue, and café is understood to mean coffee. Older people, in particular, may speak, read, and write French. Many Laotians have at least a working knowledge of English. It is not spoken or understood as widely as it is in Vietnam or Malaysia, but you could certainly get by with English as your only language.

The Laotian language is related to Thai, and Laotian speakers say that they can understand most of what is said to



The hot-spot of international grocery shopping



Cut your costs by shopping like the locals

them when they are in Thailand. Both languages share many of the same words, both use six tones, and both use the same alphabet, modeled after Old Khmer script.

Whatever your knowledge of the Laotian language is now, if you go to Vientiane and make an effort to use it, people will be very appreciative. Knowing at least a few of the basics – hello, goodbye, thank you, and so on – should be one of the first steps taken in your new home. It's important enough to the people here that when you enter the country you are provided with a sheet of basic words and phrases by the immigration office! There are at least four different institutions offering Laotian language classes in Vientiane – see the [contacts](#) section for details.

Shopping For Necessities

Broadly speaking, there are four ways to fill your refrigerator and cabinets. For one-stop shopping, the Phimphone Market has the widest selection of luxury and imported foods, wines, and spirits in Vientiane, as well as a small but high-quality selection of local fruits, vegetables, eggs, and meat. Their location in the city center also boasts a very pleasant coffee shop and bakery with bistro seating. This is a favorite meeting place and serves as a community hub for many expats and travelers in Vientiane. The Vientiane [shopping list](#) has a compilation of prices taken mainly from Phimphone.

The most convenient way to stock your pantry is by shopping at the “minimarkets” around town. There are several, such as M-Point, that carry a reasonably good selection of canned

and packaged goods, some dairy items, and a limited selection of meats and produce. Although you wouldn't be able to get all your shopping done at these mini-markets, the prices on many items are reasonable and they often carry a good selection of both local and imported goods. There are also many small, family-operated stores that sell a variety of canned and packaged foods, beverages, and occasionally produce. Prices can be quite reasonable at these little shops, though the selection is generally rather limited. Prices may be marked, or you may have to ask. The prices at both the Phimphone and M-Point are clearly

marked and there is no need to bargain. There are no large, full-service supermarkets in Vientiane - yet.

If you have a good idea of what an item should cost, you can go to one of the local markets. This is where almost all Laotians do their shopping, as well as many of the foreigners who live here. Unlike many of the markets in Southeast Asia, foreigners will often be charged the same or nearly the same as Vientiane locals, which means that although you will have to bargain, you should be able to cut your grocery cost to a mere fraction of the prices quoted in the shopping list. You won't find many imported items at the market, so if you are craving French wine or Smucker's Preserves, you'll have to go elsewhere. But this is definitely the place for meat, fish, fruits and vegetables, rice, eggs, and most other items that would be on your shopping list.

Since most foreigners will end up staying in Laos on a 30-day visa, every month spent in Laos will require a visa run across the border. As Vientiane is just across the Mekong River from Thailand, many foreigners use their visa run as an opportunity to do the bulk of their shopping at one of the “hypermarkets” in either Nong Khai or Udon Thani. Imported goods will generally cost less in Thailand, and large multinational supermarkets like Tesco-Lotus, Tops Supermarket, and Big C make shopping easy.

It's worth noting that there are almost no big-name retailers anywhere in Laos at this time. If you feel the urge for KFC, McDonalds or Starbucks, you'll have to go elsewhere to find

them. The only chain stores that I saw at the time of research were a Swenson's Ice Cream Parlor and a Pizza Company. There are no 7-11's, Walmart's or Costco's in Laos. There are a few well-known hotel chains here – Best Western has a hotel in the old part of the city and Novotel has one by the airport. But as a whole, big multinational retailers have not yet come to this country. If you want to go to those sorts of places, there are plenty of them just across the river in Thailand.

Sweet, Spicy, And Savory

Laotians enjoy an abundance of fine cuisine. If you like Thai or Vietnamese food, you'll be happy to see many familiar dishes in Laos. Laotians love their rice and noodles, stir-fries in rich and savory sauces, a wide variety of grilled meats, fish, poultry, vegetables, and herbs.



An elephantine welcome at this multinational

As in most of Southeast Asia, white rice is served with almost every meal. A variation that is extremely popular in Laos is glutinous or “sticky” rice. Served in a woven bamboo container, the rice is scooped out by hand in round mouthfuls and eaten with the main course. To show your hostess that you appreciate her rice, replace the lid when you're finished – a lid left open would indicate that the rice did not meet your expectations.

Soups are very popular in Laos, and are consumed for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Foe (pronounced “fuhh” and closely related to Vietnamese pho) is made from rice noodles and

chicken or beef broth, served with fresh lettuce, mint, basil, cilantro, lime and mung bean sprouts. It may contain chunks of beef, chicken, duck or savory fish balls. Chilies and fish sauce are usually served along with the soup for extra seasoning. In some parts of Laos, foe is so popular that it has almost totally replaced traditional solid foods! In Vientiane, however, foe is only one of many dishes people enjoy.



Larb Gai & Sticky Rice

A popular variation of foe is called khao pjak sen, which has soft, round rice noodles served in a meat broth with pieces of meat or fowl. This soup is often seasoned with crushed fresh ginger. Some street vendors sell this along with small, deep-fried Chinese pastries called khao-nom khuu.

One of the most popular dishes in Laos is larb, or laap, which is a “salad” made from minced meat, fish or fowl that has been tossed with lime juice, garlic, green onions, fish sauce, mint leaves, chilies, and roasted, powdered sticky rice (called khao khua). It's generally served at room temperature accompanied by fresh vegetables – green beans, cabbage, and sliced cucumber are all favorite choices to cut the heat of the chilies - and a counter to sticky rice.

Another mainstay of the Laotian diet is grilled chicken. Cleaned and dressed whole and half chickens, leg quarters, and individual pieces are slow-roasted over a charcoal grill until golden. Lightly seasoned with a hint of lemongrass, salt and pepper, they are a reliable and inexpensive meal that will satisfy even the most timid palate.

Bread is popular and found throughout the area, generally in the style of French baguettes. Enjoy a freshly baked, crusty mini-loaf with eggs, or as a sandwich with Lao-style pate, sliced meats, cheese and vegetables or as a tasty snack with sweetened condensed milk. Apropos Vientiane's status as a former French

colony, there are several excellent bakeries around town selling fresh croissants, cakes and other fine pastries.

Many noodle and rice dishes that are popular in Thailand are part of the Laotian diet. Green papaya salad, Pad Thai, curries, meat, and seafood are found at most restaurants on either side of the border. Fresh tropical fruits, such as mango, pineapple, banana, and dragon fruit are common; fruit shakes and smoothies made from fresh limes, strawberries, apples, carrots, oranges, bananas, and more are very popular.

Coffee drinkers will be excited to learn that Laos produces what is regarded as some of the finest coffee found anywhere in the world. Traditionally brewed through a cloth filter and served thick and strong, it has an earthy, deep, dark, and rich flavor. Happily for most coffee drinkers, it is not nearly as concentrated and syrupy as Vietnamese coffee. Coffee is often diluted with either fresh or sweetened condensed milk, and, if served black, it will be heavily sweetened unless you ask otherwise. In coffee shops and restaurants, coffee will often be served with a cup of weak tea or a glass of water. Not being a tea producer, most tea is imported from China or India, although it is widely available throughout Laos. If you like black tea, you'll have to tell your server how you like it or it will come out already whitened and sweetened. Both coffee and tea are commonly taken with breakfast and lunch.

Beer is a very important part of the Lao diet, especially for men, although you will see more women drinking beer in Laos than in other countries in the region. It is so important that the "national drink" of Laos is Beerlao - the national beer. Most beer drinkers

find Beerlao to be an excellent brew – so good that Carlsberg bought 50% of the business from the Laos government in 2006. Although other beers are sold in Laos, 99% of all beer consumed is Beerlao. For around US\$1 per (big) bottle in restaurants, it is often less expensive to drink than water or cola.

Food is commonly eaten with a fork and tablespoon, as it is in Thailand and Malaysia. To eat properly, you place the spoon in your right hand and the fork in your left. The fork is used to prod food onto the spoon, and you use the spoon to get the food to your mouth. Soup will occasionally be served with both chopsticks and a spoon. In this case, use the chopsticks to eat the noodles and vegetables, and the spoon for the broth. The only other time that chopsticks are used would be at a Chinese restaurant.

Because Vientiane is the capital city and has attracted a large amount of foreigners from all over the world, it has a great selection of international restaurants. Whether you have a taste for Chinese food or Korean, Japanese or French, German or British, Indian or Australian, Moroccan or deli-style complete with bagels and cream cheese, you'll have no difficulty finding a restaurant to satisfy your cravings. Prices tend to range from inexpensive to moderate and food quality is very good.

There are a growing number of places around Vientiane where you can learn to cook Lao food. The Thongbay Guesthouse offers courses that include a trip to the market to purchase ingredients, food preparation and, of course, the opportunity to enjoy the end product.



Street food in Vientiane is a treat. There's a long stretch of vendors who set up shop every evening along the banks of the Mekong. Some will have tables, others set up bamboo mats on the sidewalk, and still others will set out colorful, comfortable, well-worn pillows on mats. Offerings range from fresh fish that was probably caught in the river just that afternoon, noodle and rice dishes, grilled chicken and hand-made sausages, all served with fresh vegetables. The riverfront gets very busy once the sun goes down. After all, this is life in Vientiane – healthy, social, and relaxing.

Riverside relaxation

Merit And Merrymaking

“Rahula, practice loving kindness to overcome anger. Loving-kindness has the capacity to bring happiness to others without demanding anything in return.

Practice compassion to overcome cruelty. Compassion has the capacity to remove the suffering of others without expecting anything in return.

Practice sympathetic joy to overcome hatred. Sympathetic joy arises when one rejoices over the happiness of others and wishes others well-being and success.

Practice non-attachment to overcome prejudice. Non-attachment is the way of looking at all things openly and equally. This is because that is. Myself and others are not separate. Do not reject one thing only to chase after another.

I call these the four immeasurables. Practice them and you will become a refreshing source of vitality and happiness for others.”

*Attributed to be Buddha’s instructions to his son Rahula
Translation by the Ven. Thich Nhat Hahn*

In a very deep sense, the practice of Theravada Buddhism, a belief in reincarnation and the act of making merit, defines much of Laotian culture. Acceptance is a way of life - an attitude that events, whether good or bad are related to one's previous incarnation and should be accepted gracefully and without challenge. Why try to change the inevitable? Things are what they are and exactly as they should be. Each person is responsible for himself and his progression through incarnations, so there is no need for confrontation or intervention. This may explain why Laotians seem so patient. If things are not okay now, it's because of payment on a debt from a previous lifetime and maybe things will be better later, or in the next incarnation. Show kindness and compassion to others, make merit to pay off karmic debt, avoid attachment

to outcomes, and one will advance through progressively better lifetimes.

The act of making merit means that people are encouraged to be generous. Compassion practiced as a way of life means that people strive to be gentle and kind. Non-attachment is a preferred state in which a person has overcome the desire for people, material things or outcomes, thereby attaining an enlightened perspective. Attachment is believed to lead to suffering and is thought to be the main obstacle to a serene and fulfilled life. Poverty becomes much more acceptable when “doing without” is part of the important step in achieving less suffering and greater tranquility. From a spiritual standpoint, listening to the rice grow is a step towards enlightenment, just as setting a bird free or giving to someone who has less helps one achieve a peaceful and spiritual life.

Most villages and neighborhoods in Laos have at least one temple. The temple is the hub of the community where people can come to learn and practice the precepts of their faith. Not only are they places for monks to live, and pray, they are also the main center for meeting and socializing, religious ceremonies, celebrations, and festivals. In the city, temples sometimes also provide shelter for homeless and disadvantaged people.

On any morning, soon after the break of dawn, lines of Buddhist monks clad in saffron-colored robes and carrying alms bowls will make their rounds throughout the villages and cities of Laos.



Earning merit at the break of dawn



Practice loving kindness

Each neighborhood temple will have its group of monks and novices walking single file through the streets collecting alms food. Devotees seeking to earn merit, to help them in their passage through this life and elevate them to a more enlightened status in the next life, will line the sidewalks, placing gifts of rice or other staples into the alms bowls. For the Laotian people, this is a joyous and spiritual age-old tradition. The food is the lifeline for the monks, who, in accordance with their vows do not hold employment ...and the monks and temples are the lifeline of the community.

Another way to make merit is to set an animal free – an act of compassion – as Buddhists believe that everyone, even animals, need to be free. This is a ritual practiced by faithful Buddhists during the Lao New Year, but it is also performed at other times throughout the year. Fish and birds are the most common creatures to be liberated, though eels, tortoises, and other small animals are often used. They are generally sold near the temples. Devotees will buy the caged animal and ceremoniously release it. Devotees believe that this act of generosity earns merit, and almost all Laotian Buddhists will practice these rituals throughout their lives.

The Lao people love festivals and celebrations - any excuse to have a party or family get-together. What better way is there to show loving-kindness and rejoice in the happiness of others? The majority of these festivals are based on the Buddhist faith and hold important religious significance for Lao people. Laotians try to show loving-kindness to everybody, and that includes foreigners. It is worth taking the time to participate in these special events with the locals.

The most widely celebrated festival in Laos is Pi Mai Lao, the Lao New Year. This is celebrated between April 13th and 15th. Pi Mai Lao is celebrated with water, similar to Thailand's Songkran Festival. The water, which is often scented with flowers or perfume, is used to bless, clean, and purify Buddha images, homes, monks, and anyone else who happens to be passing by. Gently sprinkling a little water on a baby's head or on an elderly grandparent is considered a perfectly acceptable blessing. For youngsters and adults, Pi Mai Lao is a fun water fight where anything goes. Sometimes, shaving cream or whipped cream may be substituted for water. This is not a good time to wear your best outfit or carry your unprotected camera when venturing out into the streets – you will get soaked!

The first day of the festival coincides with the last day of the old year. Flowers and other decorations are prepared to celebrate the incoming new year. Buddha images are moved to temporary stands and cleansed and the water is collected to take home for the blessing and purification of family and friends. The second day of the festival is considered “the day of no day.” This is a very active day as it is believed that



Monks on the Mekong

anyone that stays still or sleeps during this day runs the risk of illness or misfortune in the coming year. Houses and villages are thoroughly cleaned and everyone gets soaked. The third day, which is officially the start of the new year, is a day to offer respect, give gifts to elders and to ask for, and receive, forgiveness. In the evening, Buddha images are moved back to their permanent altars and people attend the temples to listen to the monks chanting. Finally, at the end of the evening, a candlelight procession is held around the temple and the celebration is complete.



Stop, listen to the rice, then continue

In October, Boun Awk Phansa celebrates the end of the wet season and the annual Buddhist rain retreat, or Buddhist Lent. At dawn, donations and offerings are made at the temples and in the evening there are candlelight processions in and around the temples. One of the most beautiful events of Boun Awk Phansa - the ceremony of "fire-boats" or Lai Hua Fai - is held in the evening. Small boats made of sections of banana trees, adorned with flowers and lit candles, are floated down the nearest river. It is believed that these little boats will take away any bad luck and bring good luck. The more secular River Festival is also held during this time. Longboat races are held on the Mekong River, where rowing teams from Laos, Thailand, Burma, and China compete. The riverbank is packed with throngs of people and full of beer gardens, food stalls, carnival games, and hawkers of all sorts. People come to Vientiane from miles around, and the city is very crowded during the three days of festivities.

The That Luang Festival, usually held in early November in Vientiane, is the largest temple fair of the year, featuring

carnival rides, religious celebrations, and processions from Wat Si Muang to the beautiful national monument, Pha That Luang. On the morning of the full moon, which is the last day of the three-day festival, monks receive alms food. On that final evening, devotees carry miniature temples made from banana stems, decorated with flowers or other offerings, and circumambulate the temple.

A Perfect Place?

Certainly, living in Vientiane isn't for everybody. If you are dreaming of a luxurious retirement in an overseas haven that has super-highways, state of the art medical care, and five-star shopping, you won't find it in Vientiane...yet. For those dreaming more of a comfortable and laidback lifestyle in a low-cost area with friendly people, excellent food, and fine housing at very reasonable prices, this may be the perfect place - especially if you don't mind making the occasional trip abroad for medical and dental care and a bit of shopping. Laos is a country rich in history, offering both social and geographic diversity, with a Buddhist philosophy that permeates every aspect of living. There are an infinite number of places to explore, and outdoor activities abound. Here you can leave the hustle and bustle of the developed world behind and enjoy life at a slower pace. Almost everyone who visits Vientiane likes it. Come for a visit - you may end up staying here for years! ☺



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