

Laos



Surgeon General's Warning: Reading this report may cause the reader to lose focus on the life they are presently toiling at. As a result the victim could make rash decisions and leave the country within only hours of being infected. Please exercise the proper caution.

Table of Contents

- I. Basic Information
- II. Detailed Description of
 - a. Geography and Topography (including map)
 - b. History
 - c. People
 - i. Lowland, Midland, Highland Groups
 - ii. Ethnic groups
 - d. Language
 - e. Religion
 - f. Government
 - g. Economy
 - i. Agriculture
 - ii. Other Sectors
 - h. Laotian Food
 - i. Tourist Attractions
- III. Biking Laos
 - a. Some inspirational quotes of those who have done it
 - b. Suggested itinerary
- IV. Sources

Introduction

Laos is seems to be a fascinating country that because of its land locked position has long been rather deserted and used as a pawn in the power struggles of the Lower Mekong Valley. But its desertedness seems to be one of its biggest pluses for people traveling there. The people are friendly and not overly dependent on tourism. The natural beauty of the country is said to be a big drawing card and it seems an ideal place to bicycle.

Geography and Topography

Most of the western border of Laos is demarcated by the Mekong River, which is an important artery for transportation. The Khong falls at the southern end of the country prevent access to the sea, but cargo boats travel along the entire length of the Mekong in Laos during most of the year. Smaller power boats and pirogues provide an important means of transportation on many of the tributaries of the Mekong. The Mekong has thus not been an obstacle but a facilitator for communication, and the similarities between Laos and northeast Thai society--same people, same language--reflect the close contact that has existed across the river for centuries. Also, many Laotians living in the Mekong Valley have relatives and friends in Thailand. Prior to the twentieth century, Laotian kingdoms and principalities encompassed areas on both sides of the Mekong, and Thai control in the late nineteenth century extended to the left bank. Although the Mekong was established as a border by French colonial forces, travel from one side to the other has been significantly limited only since the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR, or Laos) in 1975.

The eastern border with Vietnam extends for 2,130 kilometers, mostly along the crest of the Annamite Chain, and serves as a physical barrier between the Chinese-influenced culture of Vietnam and the Indianized states of Laos and Thailand. These mountains are sparsely populated by tribal minorities who traditionally have not acknowledged the border with Vietnam any more than lowland Lao have been constrained by the 1,754-kilometer Mekong River border with Thailand. Thus, ethnic minority populations are found on both the Laotian and Vietnamese sides of the frontier. Because of their relative isolation, contact between these groups and lowland Lao has been mostly confined to trading.

Laos shares its short--only 541 kilometers--southern border with Cambodia, and ancient Khmer ruins at Wat Pho and other southern locations attest to the long history of contact between the Lao and the Khmer. In the north, the country is bounded by a mountainous 423-kilometer border with China and shares the 235- kilometer-long Mekong River border with Burma.

The topography of Laos is largely mountainous, with elevations above 500 meters typically characterized by steep terrain, narrow river valleys, and low agricultural potential. This mountainous landscape extends across most of the north of the country, except for the plain of Vientiane and the Plain of Jars in Xiangkhoang Province. The southern "panhandle" of the country contains large level areas in Savannakhet and Champasak provinces that are well suited for extensive paddy rice cultivation and livestock raising (see Crops and Farming Systems , ch. 3). Much of Khammouan Province and the eastern part of all the southern provinces are mountainous. Together, the alluvial plains and terraces of the Mekong and its tributaries cover only about 20 percent of the land area.

Only about 4 percent of the total land area is classified as arable. The forested land area has declined significantly since the 1970s as a result of commercial logging and expanded swidden, or slash-and-burn, farming.

Transportation Routes

Because of its mountainous topography and lack of development, Laos has few reliable transportation routes. This inaccessibility has historically limited the ability of any government to

maintain a presence in areas distant from the national or provincial capitals and has limited interchange and communication among villages and ethnic groups. The Mekong and Nam Ou are the only natural channels suitable for large-draft boat transportation, and from December through May low water limits the size of the craft that may be used over many routes. Laotians in lowland villages located on the banks of smaller rivers have traditionally traveled in pirogues for fishing, trading, and visiting up and down the river for limited distances. Otherwise, travel is by ox-cart over level terrain or by foot. The steep mountains and lack of roads have caused upland ethnic groups to rely entirely on pack baskets and horse packing for transportation.

The road system is not extensive. However, a rudimentary network begun under French colonial rule and continued from the 1950s has provided an important means of increased intervillage communication, movement of market goods, and a focus for new settlements. In mid-1994, travel in most areas was difficult and expensive, and most Laotians traveled only limited distances, if at all. As a result of ongoing improvements in the road system during the early 1990s, however, it is expected that in the future villagers will more easily be able to seek medical care, send children to schools at district centers, and work outside the village.

Climate: Tropical monsoon; rainy season from May through October, cool dry season from November through February, and hot dry season March and April.

Map of Laos



History

The following following section is written by Michael Buckley and is reproduced with kind permission from the Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos Handbook (second edition) published by Moon Publications Inc.

For much of its history, Laos has been under the thumb of its neighbors – at various times the Cambodians, Burmese, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Siamese (Thais). The result is that Laos has experienced great difficulty in establishing a national identity.

The earliest inhabitants of Laos were migrants from southern China. From the 11th century onward, parts of Laos fell under the Khmer Empire, and later under Siamese influence from the Sukhothai dynasty. With the fall of Sukhothai in 1345, the first kingdom of Laos emerged under Fa Ngum, a Lao prince brought up in the court of Angkor Wat. As the Khmer Empire crumbled, Fa Ngum welded together a new empire, which he modestly christened 'Lan Xang' – the Land of a Million Elephants. Lan Xang covered the whole of present-day Laos plus most of Issan (northeast Thailand). Fa Ngum declared himself king of the realm in 1353. Fa Ngum was unable to subdue the unruly highlanders of the northeast regions; these remained independent of Lan Xang Rule.

Upon Fa Ngum's marriage to a Cambodian princess, the Khmer court gave the Lao king a sacred gold Buddha called Pra Bang. Fa Ngum made Buddhism the state religion, and Pra Bang became the protector of the Lao kingdom. Nobility pledged allegiance to the king before the statue. Named after Pra Bang was the city of Luang Prabang, the cradle of Lao culture and the centre of the Lao state for the next 200 years.

Monarchs of Lan Xang

Fa Ngum's son, Samsenthai, who reigned 1373-1416, consolidated the royal administration, developing Luang Prabang as a trading and religious center. His death was followed by unrest under a swift succession of lackluster monarchs. Luang Prabang came under increasing threat from incursions by the Vietnamese and later the Burmese. In 1563, King Settathirat declared Vientiane the capital of Lan Xang, and built Wat Pra Keo to house the Emerald Buddha, a gift from the king of Ceylon, as a new talisman for the kingdom. Settathirat is revered as one of the great Lao kings because he protected the nation from foreign subjugation. When he disappeared in 1574 on a military campaign, the kingdom rapidly declined and was subject to Burmese invasion. There was a quick and lackluster succession of kings after Settathirat.

King Souligna Vongsa, who ruled 1633-94, brought stability and peace back to the kingdom – a period regarded as Lan Xang's golden age.

Siamese Satellite

When Souligna Vongsa died in 1694 without an heir, the leadership of Lan Xang was contested, and the nation split into three kingdoms. The area around Vientiane was taken over by Souligna's nephew, supported by the Annamites from northern Vietnam; Souligna's grandson controlled the area around Luang Prabang, while another prince controlled the southern kingdom of Champassak,

with Thai backing. China, Burma, and Vietnam briefly held sway over these kingdoms; bands of Chinese marauders terrorized the north of the country.

The power of Lan Xang waned; gradually, the Thais extended their influence over most of Laos until it became a Siamese satellite state. In the 1820s, Vientiane's king Anou rebelled against Siamese interference and attacked the Thais. The Thai response was to sack Vientiane in 1827, razing most of the city.

Land of the Lotus-Eaters

In the late 19th century, the king of Siam, seeking to keep Thailand free of foreign domination, ceded a large tract of territory – equivalent of what is now Laos and Cambodia combined – to the French. A series of treaties released more Lao territories to the French between 1893 and 1907. Former Lao territories were thus united again, although the three kingdoms founded in the late 17th century remained in existence, and tribal princes were able to increase their power by collaborating with the French. The French gave the new protectorate the name Laos, from *les Laos*, the plural term for the people of Laos.

Laos was a low-key French protectorate, known as the land of the lotus-eaters, where an indolent lifestyle prevailed. It was too mountainous for plantations, there was little in the way of mining, and the Mekong was not suitable for commercial navigation. The French built very few roads – the main colonial route constructed was from Luang Prabang through Vientiane to Savannakhet and the Cambodian frontier. The French built no higher-education facilities; some half-hearted attempts were made to cultivate rubber and coffee, but the main export under the French was opium. Only a few hundred French resided in Laos. They adopted a dissolute lifestyle with Lao or Annamite consorts, and left the running of the place to Vietnamese civil servants. The king was allowed to remain in Luang Prabang, trade was left to resident Vietnamese and Chinese, and the Lao carried on farming as they had for hundreds of years.

During the colonial period, administration, health care, and education hardly made any impact or progress at all. The only significant change for ordinary folk was the presence of obnoxious tax collectors, a frequent cause of uprisings. In the lowlands, revolts were quickly put down, but in the highlands of Xieng Khuang and the Bolovens Plateau, the French had trouble deploying their heavy weaponry. Sometimes a remission of taxes led to pacification.

The 50-year French sojourn in Laos came to an abrupt end in March 1945, when the Japanese took control of the government and interned the Vichy French. With the surrender of Japan in August that year, the Lao Issara (Free Laos) movement declared liberation from the French in September, and set about establishing an alternative government. The Lao Issara leader was Prince Phetsarath, a nephew of the king. Other key players in the Lao Issara were his half-brothers, Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong.

King Sisavang Vong sided with the French, and the movement for Lao independence was crushed, causing Prince Phetsarath and Prince Souvanna Phouma to flee to Thailand. King Sisavang Vong was crowned constitutional monarch of all Laos in 1946. Meanwhile, the Lao Issara dissolved, and a splinter group called the Pathet Lao formed a new resistance group based in northeast Laos. The

Pathet Lao were led by Prince Souphanouvong and backed by the Vietminh of North Vietnam. Prince Souvanna Phouma returned to Vientiane and joined the newly formed Royal Lao Government.

The French granted full sovereignty to Laos in 1953, but the Pathet Lao regarded the royalist government as Western-dominated. When in 1954 the French made a last stand at Dien Bien Phu, it ended badly, with a stunning defeat. The weary French started a withdrawal from Indochina; at this point, the US started supplying the Royal Lao Government with arms.

Civil War Skirmishes

The US-backed Royal Lao Government ruled over a divided country from 1951 to 1954. The Geneva Conference of July 1954 granted full independence to Laos but did not settle the issue of who would rule. Prince Souvanna Phouma, a neutralist, operated from Vientiane; in the south, right-wing, pro-US Prince Boun Oum of Champassak dominated the Pakse area. In the far north, Prince Souphanouvong led the leftist resistance movement, the Pathet Lao, drawing support from North Vietnam.

In 1959, the Lao king died and was succeeded by his son, Sisavang Vattana. Over the next few years there were a number of unsuccessful attempts to set up a coalition government to bring royalists and communists together. Souvanna Phouma became Prime Minister in 1956 and tried to integrate his half-brother's Pathet Lao forces into a coalition government. That government was toppled in 1958. Fighting broke out between the Royal Lao Army and the Pathet Lao in 1960; in 1961, a neutral independent government was set up under Prince Souvanna Phouma, based in Vientiane. A second attempt at a coalition government floundered in 1962 due to the widening war in Vietnam. The neutralists later joined forces with the Pathet Lao to oppose forces backed by the US and Thailand.

The Dirty War

For the next decade, Laos was plagued by civil war, coups, countercoups, and chaos, and was dragged headlong into the Vietnam War. Laos became a pawn of the superpowers, with Hmong tribesmen trained by CIA agents, Thai mercenaries fighting for the Royal Lao government, and the Pathet Lao receiving help from the Chinese, the Russians, and the Vietminh.

During the Vietnam War, Laos was effectively partitioned into four spheres of influence: the Chinese in the north, the Vietnamese along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the east, the Thais in western areas controlled by the US-backed Royal Lao Government, and the Khmer Rouge operating from parts of the south. Because of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Laos was subjected to saturation bombing by aerial raids launched from Thailand and from within Laos. In this undeclared dirty war, the tonnage of bombs dropped by US bombers on the northern Lao provinces of Xieng Khuang, Sam Neua, the Phong Saly between 1964 and 1973 exceeded the entire tonnage dropped over Europe by all sides during WWII. It is estimated that US forces flew almost 600,000 sorties – the equivalent of one bombing run every eight minutes around the clock for nine years. This air assault was shrouded in secrecy, since under the terms of the Geneva Accord of 1962 no foreign personnel were supposed to operate on Laotian territory. The Vietminh and the Chinese also violated Laos' neutrality with

infantry divisions deployed in the north. In the early days of the bombing, American pilots dressed in civilian clothing flew old planes with Royal Lao markings; Thai and Hmong pilots were also trained to fly missions.

So confusing did the number of Laotian coups become that the Americans were unsure which Phoumi, Phuouma, Phoui, Souvanna, or Souvanou was in power at any given time. American journalist Malcolm Browne described this bewildering era thus:

"Laos was as improbable as the Looking Glass world ruled by the Red Queen, the White Queen and Alice. Its towns and trackless jungles swarmed with guerillas, communist agents, Special Forces troopers, armed tribesmen, opium growers, an international corps of mercenaries and sundry camp followers. Vientiane was awash with the dollars pouring in with the foreigners. The Chinese-owned gold shops along Samsentai Street did a booming business in twenty-four karat gold bracelets, each weighing five ounces or more. Customers included pilots of the CIA's Air America, French military advisors, Belgian mercenaries, spooks, assassins and journalists. Foreigners bought gold bracelets on the theory that if they were shot down or wounded, they could pay for help from tribesmen with gold, the only currency universally respected in Laos."

Pathet Lao Victory

In 1973, as the US began its strategic withdrawal from Vietnam, the Pathet Lao gained the upper hand, controlling most of the country's provinces. In 1975, with the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh, opposition to the Pathet Lao crumbled. The Pathet Lao took Pakse, Champassak, Savannakhet, and finally Vientiane without opposition, establishing the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

People

Population: Estimates vary; July 1994 approximately 4.7 million. Growth rate estimates range from 2.6 to 2.9 percent. More than 85 percent population rural, early 1990s. Approximately 9,000 Laotians--mostly Hmong--in refugee camps in Thailand according to United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees as of January 1995; approximately 1,500 refugees in southern China, late 1994.

Ethnic Groups: Officially multiethnic nation with more than forty ethnic groups, classified into three general families: Lao Sung (upland Lao) 10 percent of population in 1993; Lao Theung (midland Lao) 24 percent; and Lao Loum (lowland Lao), 66 percent. The term Laotian is used for the national population; Lao for the ethnic group.

The Lao Loum, or lowland Lao, constitute the majority of the population--66 percent--and comprise several ethnic groups that began to move from the north into the Southeast Asian peninsula about 1,000 years ago. All Lao Loum speak languages of the Tai-Kadai family--for example Lao, Lue, Tai Dam (Black Tai), and Tai Deng (Red Tai). Lao Loum prefer to live in lowland valley areas and base agricultural production on paddy rice.

The Lao Theung, or midland Lao, are of Austroasiatic origin and are probably the autochthonous inhabitants of Laos, having migrated northward in prehistoric times. Originally paddy rice farmers, they were displaced into the uplands by the migrations of the Lao Loum and in 1993 accounted for about 24 percent of the national population. The cultural and linguistic differences among the many Lao Theung groups are greater than those among the Lao Loum or Lao Sung (see Glossary), or upland Lao. Groups range from the Kammu (alternate spellings include Khamu and Khmu) and Lamet in the north, to the Katang and Makong in the center, to the Loven and Lawae in the far south.

The Lao Sung make up about 10 percent of the population. These groups are Miao-Yao or Tibeto-Burmese speaking peoples who have continued to migrate into Laos from the north within the last two centuries. In Laos most highland groups live on the tops or upper slopes of the northern mountains, where they grow rice and corn in swidden fields. Some of these villages have been resettled in lowland sites since the 1970s. The Hmong (see Glossary) are the most numerous Lao Sung group, with villages spread across the uplands of all the northern provinces. Mien (Yao), Akha, Lahu, and other related groups are considerably smaller in numbers and tend to be located in rather limited areas of the north.

Education and Literacy: Universal, compulsory education after establishment of LPDR in 1975 but limited resources. Enrollments: estimated 603,000 primary school students, almost 130,000 secondary school students--including lower- and uppersecondary school--in 1992-93. Universal primary education goal for 2000. Nine-month school year includes five years primary school, three years lower-secondary school, and three years upper-secondary school. Those able to read and write estimated by United Nations at 84 percent (92 percent of men and 76 percent of women) ages fifteen to forty-five as of 1985; other figures cite only 45 percent total literacy; government acknowledges need for improved literacy.

Health: Health and health care poor. Chronic moderate vitamin and protein deficiencies common, especially among upland ethnic groups. Poor sanitation. Number of health care personnel increasing; concentrated in Vientiane area, where population per physician 1,400:1 versus national ratio of 10,000:2.6 in 1989. Birth rate 43.23 per 1,000; death rate 14.74 per 1,000, 1994 estimates. Life expectancy at birth 50.16 years male, 53.28 years female, 1994 estimates.

Language

The official language of the Lao People's Democratic Republic is Lao as spoken and written in Vientiane. As an official language, it has successfully become the lingua franca between all Lao and non-Lao ethnic groups in Laos.

All Lao dialects are members of the Thai half of the Thai-Kadai family of languages and are closely related to languages spoken in Thailand, northern Myanmar and pockets of China's Yunnan Province. Standard Lao is indeed close enough to Standard Thai that, for native speakers, the two are mutually intelligible. Even closer to Standard Lao are Thailand's Northern and North Eastern dialects. North-Eastern Thai (also called Isaan) is virtually 100% Lao in vocabulary and intonation; in fact there are more Lao speakers living in Thailand than in Laos.

Prior to the consolidation of various Lao meuang in the 14th century, there was little demand for a written language. When a written language was deemed necessary by the Lan Xang monarchy, Lao scholars based their script on an early alphabet devised by the Thais, which in turn had been created by Khmer scholars who used Mon scripts as models. The alphabet used in Laos is closer to the original prototype; the original Thai script was later extensively revised.

The Lao script today consists of 30 consonants (20 sounds) and 28 vowel and diphthong possibilities. Written Lao proceeds from left to right, though vowel signs may be written before, above, below, around or after the consonant, depending on the sign.

Religion

Buddhism

Buddhism was the state religion of the Kingdom of Laos, and the organization of the Buddhist community of monks and novices, the clergy (sangha), paralleled the political hierarchy. The faith was introduced beginning in the eighth century by Mon Buddhist monks and was widespread by the fourteenth century. A number of Laotian kings were important patrons of Buddhism. Virtually all lowland Lao were Buddhists in the early 1990s, as well as some Lao Theung who have assimilated to lowland culture. Since 1975 the communist government has not opposed Buddhism but rather has attempted to manipulate it to support political goals, and with some success. Increased prosperity and a relaxation of political control stimulated a revival of popular Buddhist practices in the early 1990s.

Lao Buddhists belong to the Theravada tradition, based on the earliest teachings of the Buddha and preserved in Sri Lanka after Mahayana Buddhism branched off in the second century B.C. Theravada Buddhism is also the dominant school in Thailand and Cambodia.

Theravada Buddhism is neither prescriptive, authoritative, nor exclusive in its attitude toward its followers and is tolerant of other religions. It is based on three concepts: dharma, the doctrine of the Buddha, a guide to right action and belief; karma, the retribution of actions, the responsibility of a person for all his or her actions in all past and present incarnations; and sangha, within which a man can improve the sum of his actions. There is no promise of heaven or life after death but rather salvation in the form of a final extinction of one's being and release from the cycle of births and deaths and the inevitable suffering while part of that cycle. This state of extinction, nirvana, comes after having achieved enlightenment regarding the illusory nature of existence.

The essence of Buddhism is contained in the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha: suffering exists; suffering has a cause, which is the thirst or craving for existence; this craving can be stopped; and there is an Eightfold Path by which a permanent state of peace can be attained. Simply stated, the Eightfold Path consists of right understanding, right purpose, right speech, right conduct, right vocation, right effort, right thinking, and right meditation.

The average person cannot hope for nirvana at the end of this life, but by complying with the basic rules of moral conduct, can improve karma and thereby better his or her condition in the next incarnation. The doctrine of karma holds that, through the working of a just and impersonal cosmic law, actions in this life and in all previous incarnations determine which position along the hierarchy of living beings a person will occupy in the next incarnation. Karma can be favorably affected by avoiding these five prohibitions: killing, stealing, forbidden sexual pleasures, lying, and taking intoxicants. The most effective way to improve karma is to earn merit (het boun--literally, to do good--in Lao). Although any act of benevolence or generosity can earn merit, Laotians believe the best opportunities for merit come from support for the sangha and participation in its activities.

Animism

Despite the importance of Buddhism to Lao Loum and some Lao Theung groups, animist beliefs are widespread among all segments of the Lao population. The belief in phi (spirits) colors the relationships of many Lao with nature and community and provides one explanation for illness and

disease. Belief in phi is blended with Buddhism, particularly at the village level, and some monks are respected as having particular abilities to exorcise malevolent spirits from a sick person or to keep them out of a house. Many wat have a small spirit hut built in one corner of the grounds that is associated with the phi khoun wat, the beneficent spirit of the monastery.

Phi are ubiquitous and diverse. Some are connected with the universal elements--earth, heaven, fire, and water. Many Lao Loum also believe that they are being protected by khwan (thirty-two spirits). Illness occurs when one or more of these spirits leaves the body; this condition may be reversed by the soukwan--more commonly called the baci--a ceremony that calls all thirty-two khwan back to bestow health, prosperity, and well-being on the affected participants. Cotton strings are tied around the wrists of the participants to keep the spirits in place. The ceremony is often performed to welcome guests, before and after making long trips, and as a curing ritual or after recovery from an illness; it is also the central ritual in the Lao Loum wedding ceremony and naming ceremony for newborn children.

Government

AS A TRADITIONAL SOCIETY until 1975, Laos was a conservative monarchy, dominated by a small number of powerful families. In 1975 it was transformed into a communist oligarchy, but its social makeup remained much the same. In the 600-year-old monarchy, the Lao king ruled from Louangphrabang (Luang Prabang), while in other regions there were families with royal pretensions rooted in the royal histories of Champasak (Bassac), Vientiane (Viangchan), and Xiangkhoang (Tran Ninh). They were surrounded by lesser aristocrats from prominent families who in turn became patrons to clients of lower status, thus building a complex network of allegiances. The king reigned from Louangphrabang but did not rule over much of the outlying regions of the country.

In December 1975, with the declaration of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR, or Laos), the king abdicated. Although Laos was reorganized as a communist "people's democracy," important vestiges of traditional political and social behavior remained. The aristocratic families were shorn of their influence, but a new elite with privileged access to the communist roots of power emerged, and clients of lower status have searched them out as patrons. In addition, some of the old families, who had links to the new revolutionary elite, managed to survive and wield significant influence. As newly dominant elites replaced the old, they demanded a similar deference.

Lao Loum, or lowland Lao, families continue to wield the greatest influence. Despite the rhetoric of the revolutionary elite concerning ethnic equality, Lao Theung, or midland Lao, and Lao Sung, or upland Lao, minorities are low on the scale of national influence, just as they were in pre-1975 society. However, the power of the central government over the outlying regions has remained tenuous, still relying upon bargains with tribal chieftains to secure the loyalty of their peoples.

Although manifesting many of the characteristics of a traditional Lao monarchy dominated by a lowland Lao Buddhist elite, the country has exhibited many of the characteristics of other communist regimes. It has shown a similar heavy bureaucratic style, with emphasis within the bureaucracy on political training and long sessions of criticism and self-criticism for its civil servants. Laos imported from its Vietnamese mentor the concept of reeducation centers or "seminar camps," where, during the early years in power, thousands of former Royal Lao Government adversaries were incarcerated. However, this communist overlay on traditional society has been moderated by two important factors: Lao Buddhism and government administrative incompetence in implementing socialist doctrine. Thus, what emerged in Laos has been a system aptly labeled by Prince Souvanna Phouma, former prime minister of the RLG, as "socialisme à la laotienne" (Lao-style socialism).

The *mélange* of traditional politics, accompanied by patron-client relations, with communist-style intra-institutional competition, has produced a unique political culture. Power centers tend to cluster around key personalities, and those in power become targets of opportunity for members of their extended family and friends

Economy

IN THE EARLY 1990s, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR, or Laos) was among the ten poorest countries in the world, according to a [World Bank](#) ranking, with a per capita gross national product in 1991 of just US\$200. Its labor force is poorly trained and educated, its infrastructure severely damaged from years of inadequate maintenance, and its ability to feed itself precariously dependent upon the weather. Development expenditure is financed almost entirely by foreign aid, and, by 1991, exports financed only 40 percent of imports. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, Laos, while still an impoverished country highly dependent on foreign aid for its development, had taken some essential steps toward a free-market economy.

Despite the many obstacles to economic development that remained in the early 1990s, however, in little more than a decade, starting in 1979, the government had deliberately shifted the focus of its economic policy away from socialist goals and has made great strides. Many state-owned enterprises, which had been draining the nation's treasury through subsidies, were privatized, and tax collection was boosted tremendously, helping to bring the fiscal deficit under control. Liberal laws on foreign investment and trade were passed, precipitating a surge of investment activity. Prices of many commodities were freed from government controls, domestic transport restrictions were lifted, and the cooperative farming system was ended.

The Seventh Resolution, passed at a plenary session of the Central Committee by the ruling Phak Pasason Pativat Lao (Lao People's Revolutionary Party--LPRP) in late 1979, marked the start of the country's shift toward a market-oriented economy. The resolution affirmed the government's commitment to begin to open to a market economy, as the necessary path to economic development. Since its inception in 1975, the government, in theory, has recognized private property and private enterprise. However, they were not encouraged, and, in fact, the provincial governments of Louangphrabang (Luang Prabang) and Phôngsali abolished private trade and traders through 1987. The objectives of the First Five Year Plan (1981-85) included self-sufficiency in food production, defined as the equivalent of 350 kilograms of paddy rice and other foodstuffs per capita per year, and the collectivization of agriculture. The plan also focused on developing industrial activity, increasing trade with Thailand, improving the shattered rural infrastructure, and increasing export revenues, all goals that received much greater attention as the tentative steps toward a market-oriented economy continued.

However, growth during the plan period was slower than had been anticipated, and the government decided to take bolder steps toward reform. At the Fourth Party Congress in 1986, the Second Five-Year Plan (1986-90) was endorsed, and new national development strategy was introduced. The New Economic Mechanism, as this program was called, was designed to expose the economy to world market forces gradually, without sacrificing the nation's goal of food self-sufficiency. To implement this plan, many facets of the economy were decentralized. Although the central authorities continued to set policy guidelines, responsibility for administering and financing many programs for economic and social development was delegated to the provinces. About a year after the congress, the new policy was promulgated into regulations, and changes became rapid and extensive.

The second plan also sought to encourage foreign and private investment. Among the reforms called for under the New Economic Mechanism were the lifting of numerous trade regulations and the creation of opportunities for foreign investment. In a major shift from its economic dependency on Vietnam, Laos began to look toward Thailand--and, later, toward other socialist countries--for private investment, technology transfer, and trade. Through the improvement of transportation and communications systems, encouragement of the private sector, and development of the agroforestry industrial processing sector, it was hoped that nonfood imports could be reduced and exports increased, thus improving the balance of payments. Although Laos showed an overall balance of payments surplus in 1985 and 1986, the current account deficit had been increasing, and during those years exports financed less than 30 percent of imports. The government took a new interest in environmental protection and sought to limit the practice of swidden, or slash-and-burn cultivation as a means of protecting its forest resources and encouraging cash cropping. It proved difficult, however, to bring about such a change because of negative effects on upland farmers' livelihoods. Traditional swidden agriculture does not adversely affect forest resources to the same extent that commercial exploitation does.

Many reforms were carried out successfully during the late 1980s, but the Second Five-Year Plan ended with economic performance lagging well behind planned achievements. Not least among the disappointments was the need to import rice during the droughts of 1987 and 1988, underlining the fact that an objective identified over ten years earlier--sustained self-sufficiency in food--had not been met.

Despite economic failures, however, the Fifth Party Congress, held in March 1991, reaffirmed the government's commitment to the development of a market-oriented economy. The Third Five-Year Plan (1991-95) proposes a "strategy" that aims to continue progress made under the previous two plans: improving the country's infrastructure, promoting exports, and encouraging importsubstitution industries. In August 1991, the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) approved a new constitution--the first since the previous constitution was abolished in 1975. Among its provisions is the affirmation of the right to private ownership; the words "democracy and prosperity" replaced "socialism" in the national motto.

Food

Laotian cuisine is influenced by its neighbours and the colonial French. Do not be surprised if the local food in Laos is similar to Thai. For breakfast, try Lao coffee and 'ba-tan-gho' - fried dough available from street vendors. Sticky rice, chicken or chopped spicy meat known as 'laap', spicy soup are great introductions to Lao food, as is waterfall beef.

'Laap' is a traditional Lao food made from chopped meat, chicken or duck. The finely chopped meat, spices and broth are mixed with uncooked rice grains that have been fried dry and crushed. It is eaten with a plate of raw vegetables and sticky rice.

'Tam mak houg' is salad made from sliced raw papaya, garlic, chilli, peanuts, sugar, fermented fish sauce and lime juice - it can be extremely spicy. 'Som moo' is fermented pork sausage, found in many forms. The sausage is made from raw pork - sometimes lean, sometimes pork skin. It may be eaten raw or cooked. A mixture of 'som moo', 'tam mak koug' and 'laap' makes a popular Lao lunchtime meal.

Barbecued 'som moo', served Vietnamese style, is popular in Laos. Known as 'Naem nuang', it is served as spring rolls with transparent rice paper, thin noodles and lots of herbs, vegetables, lettuce and sauce.

'Foe' (pronounced 'fur') is the name for noodle soup, which can be found everywhere in Laos. It is similar in style to the Chinese noodle soup. French baguettes are found in the larger towns, served for breakfast, as sandwich filled with pate, 'moo yor' (a pork lunchmeat), vegetables and chilli sauce. Baguettes are also dunked into coffee for breakfast. The traditional Lao diet includes a lot of raw vegetables. In Luang Prabang, try the delicious salad made from watercress.

Vietnamese, Chinese and other international food are also available in major restaurants.

Beverages

Chinese tea or 'nam saa' is usually free in restaurants. Lao coffee is served very strong and sweet, with lots of condensed milk. Lao beer is excellent. It contains about 5% alcohol and is now being exported to USA. 'Lao Lao' is a local alcohol, for the more adventurous. Imported soft drinks are expensive. There are many local versions of sweet lemonade, which are much cheaper and cause no health problems.

Tourist Attractions

These are the main attractions that we can see along our suggested bike route. These are noted on the map as well.

Vientiane

The capital city and seat of government sits on a bend in the Mekong River amidst fertile alluvial plains. Despite its chequered past, Vientiane (pronounced 'Wieng Chan' by the locals) is a laid-back city with a number of interesting wats and lively markets. The most important national monument in Laos is **Pha That Luang** (the Great Sacred Stupa), which is a symbol of both Buddhism and Lao sovereignty. Other sights of interest include **Wat Pha Kaew**, a former royal temple which is now a museum and **Wat Si Saket**, the oldest temple in Vientiane. **Xieng Khuan** is a collection of compelling Buddhist and Hindu sculptures located in a meadow, 24km (15mi) south of Vientiane.

Vientiane has around 10 top-end hotels and as many guesthouses, many of them moderately expensive, but plenty of lower-priced rooms have become available in the last few years. Most of the accommodation is in central Vientiane. You can eat at cafes, street stalls, beer halls or restaurants, offering everything from rice noodles to filet mignon. For good Lao meals, try the Dong Palan Night Market on the east bank of the Nong Chan ponds.

Vientiane is not the illicit entertainment palace it was in the early 1970s: brothels are now prohibited, the marijuana stands have disappeared from the markets and beer has replaced opium as the nightly drug of choice. Entertainment ranges from live music and discos - usually electrified Lao folk music or Western pop - to Thai, Chinese, Indian and even Bulgarian films. Tribal crafts, fabrics, jewellery and furniture are all good buys in Vientiane.

Luang Prabang

This 'city' is just barely waking from a long slumber brought on by decades of war and revolution. Luang Prabang has only 16,000 residents and few concessions to 20th-century living, save for infrequent electricity and a few cars and trucks. Rush hour occurs when school students are let out and the streets fill with bicycles.

Its main tourist attractions are its historic temples - 32 of the original 66 built before French colonisation still stand - and its lovely setting encircled by mountains at the confluence of the Khan and Mekong rivers. Sights include the **Royal Palace Museum**, **Wat Xieng Thong** and **Wat Wisunlat**. Just 25km (15.5mi) along the Mekong River are the famous **Pak Ou caves**, some of which are filled with Buddha images; 29km (18mi) south of the town are the beautiful **Kuang Si waterfalls**.

Some Inspirational quotes from some people who have done it

I got these quotes from some people's travelogues of their trip. I think they give us a bit of an idea of what we can expect by biking in Laos.

"With six days of cycling we came from Luang Prabang to Vientiane which was one of the best and most spectacular riding we did in our four month tour"

"The ride was constantly beautiful. We stopped every kilometer or less for another photo, few of which captured much"

"We explored several wats but one in particular impressed us most. For this one we had to pay 1000 kip each to enter. The most impressive building was the smallest too at about the size of a maid's cottage. It was painted pink. Amazing mosaics depicted people riding elephants, praying, and general daily life scenes"

"Laos has very dramatic scenery, which is beautiful. On a bike it has another dimension, sweat. Most places go uphill for a while then down a little then up again, with more ups than down. In Laos you go uphill then as you turn the corner it goes up again and again."

"Laos – it doesn't get much better than this. Mr. Pumpy enjoyed himself enormously"

"But traveling by bike through the heart of rural Laos gave us a chance to interact directly with a most beautiful and peaceful part of the world."

The consensus seems to be that Laos is a very quiet place where it is possible to get a good feel for the people and their life by traveling by bicycle.

Suggested Itinerary

The itinerary I think we should consider goes like this. We enter Laos from Thailand at Chang Kong near Chang Rai. Then we bike to Luang Prabang. Luang Prabang is a major tourist site so we would spend a few days there. From there we bike to the capital Vientienne. This is a stretch of biking that gets rave reviews. After spending a few days in the capital we would bicycle towards the Vietnamese border and cross in to Vietnam near Ben Nape and head to Vinh in Vietnam.

There are a few variations we could do on this basic plan. Of course if we make the counter clock wise loop of the countries we would do the aforementioned route exactly opposite. We would enter from Vietnam near Ben Nape and exit the country near Chang Rai in Thailand.

Also if we want to save a some time we can do two things. In Northern Laos we could take a river boat from the Thai border to Luang Prabang. This would save us a few days. However the bike riding is supposed to be great in Northern Laos and so if we can I would like to not skip it. Another time saving measure would involve flying from Ventianne, the capital, to Hanoi. This would save a us a lot of time and would help us to avoid back tracking in Vietnam. This option would be a little more expensive however.

It is possible to obtain 30 day visas in Thailand, or Vietnam, in the major cities before entering Laos. Shouldn't be a problem.

Sources

Pictures On Title Page

<http://www.interq.or.jp/www1/akihitok/akihito/laos/laos.html>

Map

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/index.html>

History

<http://www.visit-laos.com/sabbaidee/history.htm>

Food

<http://myweb.gettinghere.com/country/laos/food.cfm>

Language

<http://www.vada.nl/talenll.htm>

Tourist Attractions

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/>

Other information

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>