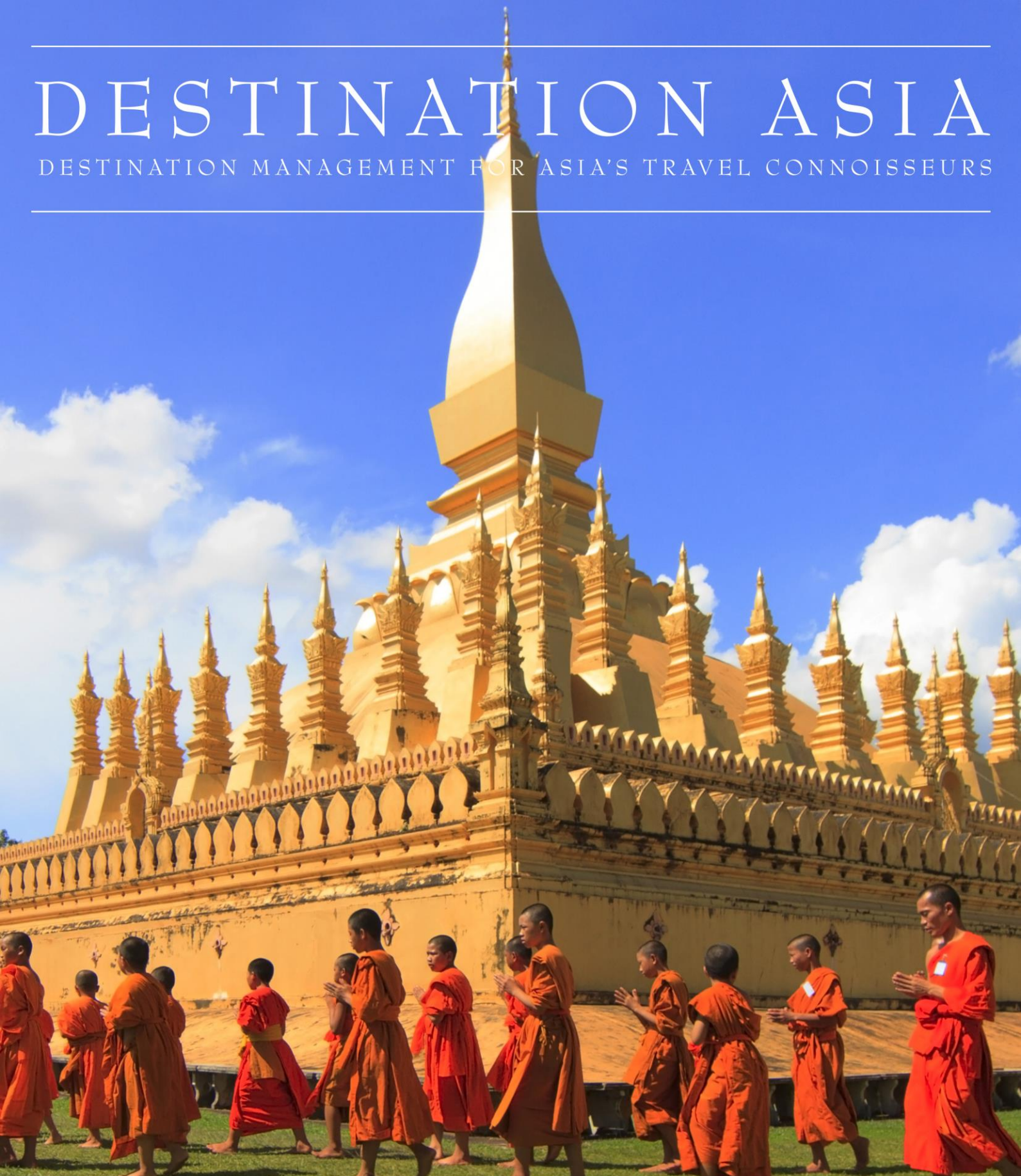

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LAOS

COUNTRY FACT SHEET

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ABOUT LAOS

The “Land of a million elephants” offers a refreshing change from the modernity of the rest of the world. This landlocked mountainous nation offers misty mountains, beautiful French colonial towns and golden glittering Buddhist stupas. Laos offers a mostly mountainous, steep terrain with meandering narrow river valleys. With an estimated population of nearly 5.7 million, Laos is one of the most sparsely populated countries in Asia. Natural landmarks include the Annamite Mountains close to the border with Vietnam, as well as the Mekong River, which flows from China and along Laos' border with Thailand. About 55 per cent of the landscape is pristine tropical forest. The country is teeming with wildlife including elephants, leopards, panthers, gibbons and black bears.

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AIRPORTS

There are no direct flights into Laos from Europe or North America and most Western tourists fly into neighboring countries for onward connections to Laos. The country's main international airports are Wattay International Airport in Vientiane and Luang Prabang International Airport. The emergence of smaller domestic carriers has made travelling around the expansive terrain of mountainous Laos much easier.

ARRIVAL/DEPARTURE INFORMATION

Prior approval is no longer required for visas to Laos. Foreign tourists are generally admitted into the country for 30 days with a visa on arrival (obtained at most border check points) without prior authorization and also for 30 days with a visa issued at a Laotian embassy overseas. Please contact your nearest embassy or consulate of Laos to get specific information. Applicants need to fill in an application form and provide two passport-sized photographs. The applicant's passport must be valid for at least six months beyond the expected departure date from Laos. Once again, please contact your local Lao embassy for the most accurate information. Visitors can extend a tourist visa either through the immigration office in Vientiane or through a travel agent. There is a departure tax for all international flights which is not included in the ticket price.

"All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveler's responsibility to check visa requirements before traveling."

BUSINESS HOURS

Offices are usually open from Monday to Friday, between 8.30-am until 5-pm. Shops are open from Monday to Saturday between 9-am and 5-pm with some also open on Sunday. In the tourist enclave of Luang Prabang, shops often open later until 8-pm.

BANKS

Banks are open Monday to Friday, from 8-am 3.30-pm. In Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Pakse, and other major towns, ATMs are plentiful. ATM machines distribute only Lao currency with a maximum 1,000,000 kip per time transaction (USD\$125). VISA and Master Card are now accepted at the larger hotels in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. For everyday expenses, it is advisable to carry both US dollars and kip (Lao currency). Make sure you always have a stock of small denominations as many vendors will not have much change. The BCEL Bank can change American Express Travellers' cheques for Lao kip or US dollars (a three to five per cent commission is typically levied). Very few shops, hotels or restaurants accept travellers' cheques and they can be difficult to exchange outside of the main cities. The use of credit cards is still not widespread in remote locations in Laos. However, most upscale hotels, shops and restaurants in Luang Prabang and Vientiane accept VISA and Master Card.

CLOTHING

As with other regional tropical countries, lightweight cotton clothing is the most comfortable. Warm clothing is needed when visiting northern Laos during the winter months from November to February. The dress code is fairly casual throughout the country. A lightweight raincoat is a good idea in the rainy season. It is advisable to cover arms and legs in the evenings to protect against mosquito bites. An umbrella is also a good idea in both the hot and rainy seasons as it will offer protective shade from the strong sun and the tropical downpours. Tourists should respect a dress code at temples and palaces. Visitors must not wear the following when entering these revered places: sleeveless shirts; sportswear; tights/leggings; shorts; short skirts; three-quarter length trousers; flip flops/sandals without a strap behind the heel; swimwear/beachwear; and t-shirts with offensive texts or images.

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CURRENCY

The kip is the currency of Laos and notes are distributed in denominations of 1,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 kip and 100,000 Kip. US dollars, Euros and Thai baht are also accepted in many places in the more popular tourist areas and these currencies are more convenient to carry than large wads of kip. Banks, hotels, and jewelry shops all offer currency exchange services.

CUSTOM ALLOWANCES

The following goods may be imported into Laos without incurring a customs duty:

- 500 cigarettes ,or 100 cigars, or 500 gms of tobacco;
- two bottles of wine
- one bottle of other alcoholic beverages;
- personal jewelry up to 500 gms.

The export of antiques such as Buddha images and other artifacts is prohibited. Any antique items purchased in other countries must be declared to customs on arrival in Laos.

ETIQUETTE (DOS AND DON'TS)

DOS IN LAOS

- Nop is a greeting performed by joining one's hands together in a praying gesture at the chin level.
- The Lao word for "hello" is sabaidee – say it with a smile and you will be well received.
- In Lao homes, if the host (especially elderly people) sit on the floor, you should sit there as well – don't sit anywhere higher if you want to be seen as a polite.
- It is polite to gently crouch down when walking past someone who is seated, especially older people.
- Lao people usually serve water to guests at their home – it is polite to accept it even if you don't want to drink it.
- Dress respectfully when visiting religious shrines or temples.

DON'TS IN LAOS

- The head is considered high. It is not polite to touch local people's heads.
- Feet are considered "low" so placing them on furniture or pointing at people with them is considered highly disrespectful.
- Personal cleanliness is valued highly in Laos. Anyone who has strong body odour will be considered with disdain.
- Overtly physical displays of affection, such as kissing and hugging in public are considered ill-mannered.
- Don't be aggressive – the local people are peace loving, they avoid confrontation and speak with soft tones....it is best to do the same!
- Do not use illegal substances. As in most countries in the region, the consequences if you are caught are very severe.

ELECTRICITY

Lao uses 220V. Power outlets usually vary between two-pronged round or flat sockets; however, there is no set standard. It is recommended travelers bring a universal plug adaptor. Power outages happen occasionally but some higher-end hotels have their own generators to provide an emergency power source.

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ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE

The Lao nightlife is quiet and laid-back as it is technically illegal for a nightclub or bar to stay open later than 23.30-pm but some nightclubs in Vientiane do remain open later than this designated time. The capital's French Cultural Center provides movies and musical performances. Elsewhere in the capital, there are plenty of bars along the river. Luang Prabang provides laid back bars serving cheap beer but be wary that the streets empty early in Laos and guesthouses bolt their doors early, so don't get locked out!

FOOD

Lao cuisine has many similarities to Thai with lots of aromatic herbs and spices – such as lemongrass, chillies, ginger and tamarind – used to flavor dishes. Sticky rice is the main ingredient in Lao cuisine. Laotians reportedly eat more sticky rice than any other country in the world per capita and sticky rice is considered the essence of what it means to be Lao person. Many Laotians even refer to themselves as Luk Khao Niew, which can be translated roughly as: “Children/descendants of sticky rice”. This rice is usually served with fermented fish, and a fish sauce called nam pa. Chicken and pork dishes are also popular. Soups served with noodles, bamboo shoots and fresh vegetables abound. A culinary remnant of French colonial occupation is evident in the crunchy baguettes stuffed with pate and salads and an abundance of French restaurants that offer sophisticated food at astoundingly cheap prices. Other Western cuisine is freely available in the major tourism destinations of Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

HEALTH

No vaccinations are required except for yellow fever if you are coming from an area where the disease is present. However visitors should be inoculated against typhoid, cholera, hepatitis A and B, tetanus and polio. Malaria and Dengue Fever are present in Laos and it is advisable to take precautions, especially if travelling off the established tourist trail. Medical facilities are rather limited in the country and it is essential to take out good medical insurance coverage in case medical evacuation is needed (usually to Bangkok). If you are on any medication, bring an adequate supply of pills/medicine as these can be difficult to find within the country.

HOTEL INFORMATION

Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng and Vientiane provide a good range of accommodation, but facilities can be basic in destinations off the beaten track. From October to January (during the high season) many of the best hotels are full. By contrast during the low-season – any date that falls outside of January to February – there is more scope for cheaper rooms. Laos has several five-star options and some fantastic boutique hotels. Luang Prabang, in particular, offers many elegant colonial buildings that have been converted into stylish boutique hotels. Laos is eager to promote ecotourism and visitors can stay in specially constructed eco-lodges around the country. Especially popular are the river side lodges that allow easy exploration of river life and rural settings. Another option is home stays which are an excellent way to immerse oneself in the local way of life. Destination Asia can supply details about our accommodation packages in this country.

INSURANCE

We highly recommend that all travelers to Laos purchase comprehensive travel insurance beforehand which covers evacuation by air. Medical facilities are limited, therefore, the policy should cover the cost of a medical evacuation flight out of Laos, usually to Bangkok. For adventure excursions such as cycling tours, proof of purchase of a travel insurance policy is usually required.

INTERNET

Major hotels throughout the country offer both Wi-Fi access and business centres with timed computer use. Cyber cafes are also plentiful in major tourist destinations with prices around USD\$1 per hour. Many Internet cafes sell pre-paid international phone cards.

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LANGUAGE

The national language is Lao, which is closely related to Thai. Although there are five major dialects, they are all mutually intelligible and Lao people believe they all speak variations of one language. In Luang Prabang and Vientiane, English is widely spoken and French – the language of the former colonial occupiers – is still spoken by many government officials and educated members of the older generation.

PEOPLE

Laotians are hospitable and friendly people and are characterized by a laid-back charm. The ethnic Lao in Laos account for 50 to 60 per cent of the population. Related groups include the Tribal Tai, Black Tai, White Tai, and Red Tai. These groups are not Buddhists and are influenced by the neighboring Sino-Vietnamese culture. The country contained 43 ethnic groups at a recent official classification. These are mostly resident in the countryside and mountainous areas. The cities contain significant ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese populations. Destination Asia can organize trips to hill tribe communities so guests can interact with these people.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Closure of tourist sites can occur at short notice on public holidays and our Destination Asia guides will give guests advice about this situation.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

You will find that your feet or a hired bicycle will serve you the best to get around most towns. Even the capital Vientiane is easy to walk around as it is quite compact. Peaceful Luang Prabang is one of the nicest walking and biking destinations in Asia. Alternatively, tuk-tuks provide the main form of transportation in many towns. These noisy three-wheeled machines will get you to your destination in no time and at little cost. Regular taxis can only be found in Vientiane. To explore the countryside in depth, it is best to hire a car and driver. Destination Asia provides safe and reliable transportation across the country.

RELIGION

As in the neighboring countries of Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia, Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion. Approximately 60-70 per cent of the population are said to be followers of this faith and saffron-robed monks are an iconic sight across the country. The remaining population predominantly follows animism in the form of spirit (phii) worship. Less than two per cent of the population is Christian and there are also small communities of Muslims, mainly in Vientiane.

SAFETY

Laos is generally a safe country and crime directed against foreigners is rare. Nevertheless, as a global rule, never leave belongings unattended and always maintain a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. In some tourist sites you may encounter some insistent souvenir sellers. A polite "No, thank you" usually will suffice. Leave your expensive jewelry at home and always use hotel safety deposits boxes or in-room safes for valuables.

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SHOPPING

The Lao sarong or pha sin made from silk or cotton is the most authentic purchase. The markets in Vientiane and Luang Prabang are worth visiting to buy this product. Silk, cotton fabrics, wood carvings, pottery, silver jewelry and handmade shirts are the best buys. Large western style shopping malls and international brand stores are conspicuous by their absence but this is one of the attractions of a country that offers something different from more developed countries in South East Asia.

STREET STALLS

Although the majority of vendors have fixed prices, bartering is still advisable for more expensive items. In Vientiane, it's worth heading out to the weaving district of Ban Nong Bouathong, northeast of the city. For markets, try Talat Sao in Vientiane and the Night Market in Luang Prabang which offers fabrics, handicrafts, jewelry and much more.

TELEPHONE

Hotels have IDD phones but for a more inexpensive option head to the abundance of Internet cafes for cheaper dialing rates. If you have worldwide coverage, you can bring your mobile phone and use it to make domestic or international calls, but this again can be expensive so check the rates beforehand. The Lao mobile network is cheap and affordable. Local "pay as you go" SIM cards can easily be purchased in the main cities, with international rates around 2,000 kip per minute.

TIME ZONE

Laos is GMT + 7 and does not operate on a daylight-saving system.

TIPPING

Tipping for good service is not expected but is always appreciated. Tipping the guide on your tours is optional and should depend on how satisfied you are with the excursion. Hotel porters should be tipped for carrying bags to the room. In other cases, it is totally up to the individual when and how much they tip.

WATER

It is not advisable to drink tap water but bottled mineral water is safe and available everywhere. All hotels provide a complimentary bottle of local mineral water, per person, in the room. Ice cubes in drinks are generally okay in good standard hotels and restaurants but it is best to avoid them on street stalls or in country areas. Some minor stomach problems are always possible when travelling in exotic countries so bring the appropriate medication.

WEATHER

The weather is very similar to that of northern Vietnam. The dry season runs from November to May which is the best time to visit as the temperature is most bearable. However, the mountainous areas can be very cold at this time – down to around 5°C (41F). The wet season varies according to the location; in Vientiane it is generally from May to September; in Luang Prabang, August is generally the wettest month.

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DESTINATION ASIA LAOS OFFICE:

Luang Prabang Office

House No. 214, Unit: 15,
Ban Hathien Village, Phetsarat Road
Luang Prabang, Laos P.D.R
Tel: +856 71 212 881
E-mail: laos@destination-asia.com

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

Police dial 191, or 21 27 03/06 (in Vientiane); Emergency Medical Services, dial 190; Fire service dial 190;

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