

have fun the path less taken: laos about your program



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Introduction to Laos

Laos, the sparsely populated, often overlooked country in Southeast Asia, has recently seen a boom in tourism as the political situation has stabilized. Laos is the only landlocked country in the region, and is bordered by China, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. It has the dubious honor of being the most heavily bombed country in the world, evident by the multitude of people with serious disabilities from bombs and landmines. The United States is among those countries most responsible for a large portion of these casualties, as it was policy for unused explosives to be dropped over the Lao countryside as fighter jets traveled to and from Vietnam to air bases in Thailand during the Vietnam War.



The Lao people are subject to few political and economic freedoms. The average standard of living is quite low, and a good majority of the population get by on subsistence agriculture.

After achieving independence following World War II, Laos found itself embroiled in a secret, CIA-sponsored action, during which the Americans unsuccessfully sponsored the Hmong people in their struggle against the Pathet Lao revolutionaries.



After the revolution in 1975, Laos went into a period of isolation from which it is only now slowly emerging. Until around a decade ago, few travelers made their way into Laos. Since the early '90s, while starting to encourage economic reform and private enterprise, Laos has also opened up to travel and is promoting itself as a new tourist destination. Travel to the country is therefore exciting and extremely rewarding, but

can at times be frustrating as the Lao infrastructure struggles to cope with the

ever-increasing numbers of visitors. However relative to neighbors such as Cambodia and Vietnam, the pace of infrastructure development is incredibly slow. The sleepy, relatively undeveloped nature is part of its charm, as are the friendliness and warmth of its people.

Community

Your Globe Aware program is based in the burgeoning town of Luang Prabang (provincial population 365,000). Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage site, as it boasts some of the most charming French-Colonial architecture in Southeast Asia. Luang Prabang is rich in cultural heritage, replete with monasteries, monuments, traditional costumes, and beautiful local crafts. Its geographical location is stunning, as it sits at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers.

This is the most popular tourist destination in Laos; don't be surprised at the number of guesthouses and eateries catering to foreigners.



Sample Itinerary

This is an example to give a rough idea of what your week will be like. Please note that all of these activities are subject to change and will depend on how many volunteers are there during the week, project availability, weather, previous progress, etc.

Volunteers should expect to work between 5 and 6 hours a day. You will have two to three hours of unstructured free time, and several cultural awareness excursions.

Saturday

Mid-day	Meet up with Globe Aware Coordinator; Go to program site and get settled in; Lunch
Afternoon	Introductions and Orientation; Discuss goals and itinerary
Evening	Discuss preconceptions and expectations; Team Building Exercise; Free Time, Check your e-mail, explore the area, write in your journal, etc; Dinner

Sunday

Morning	5:30 wake-up call; breakfast; Give alms to monks (can be done everyday if desired)
Mid-Morning	Cultural Scavenger Hunt Activity; Free Time, explore
Mid-day	Lunch; Journal Project; Discuss Scavenger Hunt
Afternoon	Go to Wat Sipouthabat; Discussion with Monks
Evening	Cooking lesson; Dinner; Free time, write in your journal, call home, chat with other volunteers, etc.

Monday

Morning	6am wake-up call; Breakfast; Travel to orphanage
Mid-Morning	Teach English lessons, Do arts and crafts with the kids
Mid-Day	Lunch
Afternoon	Paint a mural in a classroom; Present donations; Play with the kids; Participate in meditation with the monks (might be able to do everyday)
Evening	Go to the market; Free Time; Dinner

Tuesday

Morning	6am wake-up call; Breakfast; Language lesson
Mid-Morning	Teach English lessons at the Buddhist High School
Mid-Day	Lunch with Novice Monks
Afternoon	Teach computer skills; School Beautification Projects; Present donations
Evening	Explore Luang Prabang; Go to the night market; Go on mission to taste Lao Beer; Free Time; Dinner

Wednesday

Morning	6am wake-up call; follow usual routine
Mid-Morning	Wheelchair Project and/or Restoration Project
Mid-Day	Lunch
Afternoon	Present Wheelchairs; See pottery being made; Visit Royal Palace
Evening	Free Time; Cooking lesson; Dinner

Thursday

Morning	6am wake-up call; Breakfast
Mid-Morning	Cultural Excursion, floating market, visit temples
Mid-Day	Lunch
Afternoon	Go to Pak Ou Caves or Kuang-Si waterfalls
Evening	Free Time; Dinner; Prepare for farewell party

Friday

Morning	6am wake-up call; Follow usual routine
Mid-Morning	Presentation of Donations; Maintenance Projects around the school
Mid-Day	Lunch
Afternoon	Wrap-up lessons and projects; Farewell party
Evening	Free Time; Help make dinner; Dinner; Climb Mount Phousi and watch the sunset

Saturday

Morning	6am wake-up call; Evaluations; Share the Group Journal Project; Breakfast; Goodbyes
Mid-Morning	Depart for the airport

Projects and Expectations

Your volunteer work may be spread between the government orphanage, and a variety of other village schools and community projects, as needed. Specific projects will be decided immediately before your volunteer week based on progress of previous groups and specific need at the time. You may make improvements to school structures. Facilities are often very inadequate, and you may be making general repairs such as replacing doors and windows, painting, or pouring a concrete floor, for example. You will be working alongside the local people to make vast improvements their communities.



The community chooses your work projects before your arrival based on the progress of prior groups and the immediate needs of the community.

Please remember that concepts of scheduling and organization are not universal. It is best to keep an open mind and not be judgmental when visiting a foreign country. Remember that your way of doing things may not be the best way here – the locals usually also have a very good reason for completing a task in a certain way, and their priorities may be different than ours. Here is an example:

*"But Mario, why are we building the fence so close to the river?
Surely erosion will cause the fence to fall off the edge!"*

*"Don't worry, the foundation is very thick – it won't fall.
Besides, we can't move it over any more because the
boundary of the soccer field is too close!"*

Ah ha!

We understand your desire to know as much as possible about the project you will be working on. It is important to understand that projects are often not set in place until about two weeks prior, as they are based on factors such as which projects were finished by the last group, what supplies are available, how many volunteers are in your group, weather conditions, the changing priorities of the community, etc, and can even change upon arrival, for example based on the fitness level of the specific volunteer group and changing weather. Therefore its best to approach the experience with an open attitude, knowing you'll be working approximately 6.5 hours a day during the week days, usually

concentrated earlier in the day, and you'll have a couple of hours of unstructured free time every day. There are usually three to four planned but optional leisure and cultural activities throughout the week. Communicate with your coordinator. If you find the work level is too much, or not enough, he or she will do as much as possible to work with you.

Leisure Activities

There will be several planned (but optional) excursions to see local sites such as swimming at a waterfall or visiting Pak Ou caves, and you can also use your free time for site seeing. There is also a wonderful night market where you can see beautiful local handicrafts, and many temples to see in the town center.

Luang Prabang has dozens of religious sites, both large and small. The best way to see these sites is by foot or by bicycle. The biggest concentration of temples is in the old quarter, much of which forms a peninsula between the Mekong and the Khan rivers. In between temple visits, there are many small restaurants perched high on the banks of the Mekong where you can watch life float slowly by.

Temple Wat Xieng Thong - is situated 300m south of the confluence of the Mekong and Khan rivers and was built in 1560. The temple is the most stunning in Luang Prabang, richly decorated with colored glass and gold.

Mount Phousi and Wat That Chom Sii - situated 150m and 300 steps up above the peninsula with spectacular views of the city and surrounding countryside. The climb is tiring, but the views from the top are certainly worth it. From the top, you can see the old Royal Palace, now the Palace Museum, the rivers and surrounding villages. The temple has a gold-spired stupa that can be seen from most parts of the city.

The Royal Palace is now a museum and houses a collection of artifacts belonging to former rulers of the Kingdom of Lane Xang.

On Sunday, you are likely to visit Kuangsi Waterfall or see the Pak Ou Caves. About 35km from Luang Prabang, the beautiful, multi-level Kuangsi falls are popular with tourists and locals alike, as they also have picnic grounds and ample photo opportunities. The falls tumble down over 60 meters, through a series of cool pools that are great for swimming.

Pak Ou Caves

A repository for old or damaged Buddha images that once graced household shrines, the caves of Tham Ting and Tham Phoum have become highly venerated sanctuaries. During Lao New Year boatloads of Luang Prabang residents make the 25km pilgrimage up the Mekong River to the caves to wash the Buddha images and make merit.

On the opposite bank of the Mekong from the caves sits the village of Ban Xang Hai. For centuries the village made its living by crafting stoneware jars,

more recently it has become famous for brewing a particularly fiendish liquor, made from fermented sticky rice, called 'lao-lao.'



Additional Packing Information

Please refer to the general orientation handbook for a general suggested packing list which is more complete than the one below. Make sure to pack enough clothes to be comfortable, considering that you may get dirty doing volunteer work. You may not need to do laundry on a weeklong trip. It is ok to wear clothes more than once. Remember that modesty is a sign of respect in all of our program sites. Short shorts or skirts at religious sites are not appropriate, though you may see other visitors ignoring the cultural norm. Most women wear very long skirts, for example. Aside from the usual clothes and toiletries, you may enjoy bringing games or books for free time.

Essential Items:

- Bug Repellent with at least 20% deet
- Sunscreen
- Flashlight
- Water bottle
- Umbrella
- Swim suit
- Towel

Please note that the packing list is meant as a guideline. There is no single item that you can't live without for one week. Pack what you think you will need to be comfortable, but do not get preoccupied about items that you didn't bring, weren't on the list, etc. Everyone has different opinions about essential items!

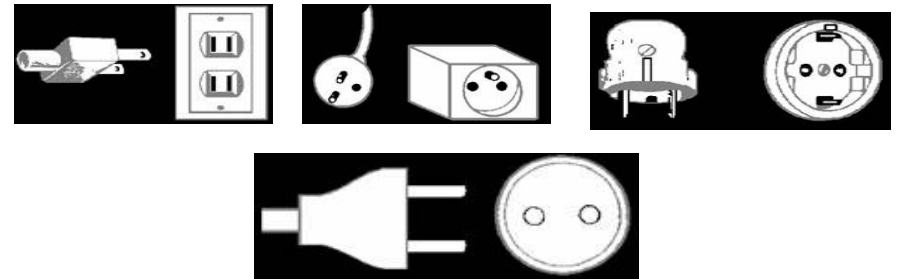
Accommodations

You will be staying in a modest guesthouse or hotel with air conditioning, a ceiling fan, and western style flushing toilets. Hot water is usually available but not necessary. Volunteers are generally placed two to a room, grouped by

gender, and dependant on the make-up of the group. Each room has its own private bathroom.

Electricity

The electricity in Laos is 230V 50Hz. This is a higher voltage than in North America, though most modern devices are already equipped to handle this. Read the label on the large plug-end of your charger. The photos shows the wall receptacle design usually found in Laos. They accommodate both flat prongs (like in North America) and round prongs (like much of Europe and Asia). Most receptacles in Laos are two pronged, missing the third grounding prong at the bottom.



Food

You will be served Lao and regional cuisine. All other meals will be taken in nearby cafes or at the program site, depending on project tasks for the day.

Sticky rice forms the central theme of virtually every Lao meal. It is generally accompanied by a selection of dips, parboiled vegetables, salad, soup and various curried meat dishes or fish dishes. The sticky rice is generally served in



a simple but attractive woven bamboo container called a tip khao. It's considered bad luck not to replace the lid on top of the tip khao at the end of the meal. While sticky rice is eaten by hand, long grain rice is always eaten with a spoon and fork.

Lao food is quite similar to Thai food--and indeed identical to much of the food eaten in Thailand 's ethnically Lao Northeast. Dishes are generally cooked with fresh ingredients that include vegetables, poultry (chicken, duck), pork, beef and water buffalo. Fish and prawns are readily available but are nearly always freshwater,

since Laos is a landlocked country relatively far from the sea.

Popular Lao dishes include *tam som* --really the equivalent of Thai *som tam* --a spicy salad made of sliced green papaya mixed with chilli peppers, garlic, tomatoes, ground peanuts, field crab, lime juice and fish sauce. This is often eaten with sticky rice and *ping kai* or grilled chicken. Another standby is *laap*, a spicy dish of minced meat, poultry or fish mixed with limejuice, garlic, chili pepper, onion and mint.

Weather

Laos is generally hot year round. Most days see lots of sunshine and temperatures around the 90s. The wet season starts in May and continues until early November. The wettest months are September and October. The rainy season is not necessarily the worst time to visit the country, as downpours are usually hefty but short, with the sun returning within a few hours. We recommend checking the weather online proper to your departure so that you will know what to expect.

Money

There are currently two unpredictable ATMs in Luang Prabang. Make sure to bring ample cash prior to your arrival. You may be able to get a cash advance on a credit card, though rates are high for this transaction. The local currency is the Kip. The US dollar and the Thai baht are very popular alternatives that are widely accepted, especially for bigger purchases. It is not unusual to be quoted a price in kip, pay in US dollars and receive Thai baht as change. US dollars and Thai baht can be changed at hotels, banks or any foreign exchange shop licensed by the Bank of Lao PDR. Credit cards are becoming accepted at more and more shops and restaurants in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. It is best to carry US dollar bills in small denominations. The exchange rate in March 2008 was 8,500 kip to US\$1.

****Also, a note for all program locations—it is a good idea that you call your bank and credit card companies before you depart and notify them of the country you will be traveling to and the dates of your travel so that they will allow charges and/or withdrawals internationally.****

Phone and Internet

Do not expect to spend a lot of time on the phone during your short stay in Luang Prabang. You may be able to purchase calling cards in Laos or use an internet phone to call home. There are a number of internet cafes in the center of town that you may access in your free time, but again, do not plan on doing any major computer work while you are there.

Health

There are no **required** vaccinations for travel to Laos. Please see your Volunteer Handbook for a list of base immunizations we recommend for all travelers. Additionally, according to the CDC, vaccinations recommended for travel to Laos include the following: HEPATITIS A & B, TETANUS, TYPHUS, POLIO, RABIES and JAPANESE ENCEPHALITIS.

Malaria: There is limited risk for malaria at the program site. We have never had a report of any volunteers contracting malaria, nor do they typically take anti-malarial drugs unless they plan to travel in high-risk areas before or after the volunteer program.

Please defer to the CDC's Laos Travel website for official recommendations.

<http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationLaos.aspx>

Arrival and Meet-Up

A Globe Aware representative (your trip coordinator) has been trained to meet you at a specific point. This cannot be changed unless previously arranged with the office.

Your coordinator will meet you in Luang Prabang at the airport exit at 1pm, unless otherwise expressly arranged, he will then take you to the program site, and accompany you throughout the program. The airport is VERY small with only one pick up area, but there are often crowds of families waiting for arrivals, so don't be worried if you do not see your coordinator at first.

If we do not see you at the meet up point, our first step is to check with the airline to see if your flight was delayed. If it was not, our next call is to your emergency contact. Therefore if you have any sort of change in your arrival, please make sure to inform your emergency contact, as this is the first person that we will be contacting. We will do our best to contact you, however if we cannot contact you in about an hour's time we will continue without you. Once you have made contact with either your emergency contact or our headquarters, we will try and work out arrangements to get you to location, but it may be at your extra expense, as getting to the program site is not easy. Also, if you cannot make it on your scheduled program, please call us ahead of time, so we can schedule you on another program (your fee is good for up to one year.)

If you feel there is a problem with these arrangements, or you cannot meet the time schedule, please contact us at least several days prior to your departure, and we will try to resolve this the best we can. However, because of certain limitations, and strains on other volunteers, such requests should be made within a fair amount of time (at least one and a half weeks before the program date) and will be remedied to our discretion.

Entry-and Exit

You must purchase a VISA upon arrival in Laos for \$30. You can either bring extra passport sized photos with you or purchase photo options upon arrival at the airport.


Make sure that you are applying for a TOURIST visa when filling out application forms. This visa is valid for 30 days but can be extended.

Safety and Security

Our program locations are generally very safe, though it is important to use common sense at all times. Please review the State Department's travel information at http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_946.html for further information.

The United States Embassy is located in Vientiane at:
Rue Bartholomie, That Dam
Phone: (856) 21-267-000
After Hours Emergency: (856) 20-550-2016

Further Readings

- Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics & Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic by Martin Stuart-Fox: A fine primer on the sociopolitical make-up of Laos .
 - Laos: Beyond the Revolution by Joseph Zasloff & Leonard Unger: Contemporary history text with some good insights into the country's modern identity.
 - The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos by Christopher Robbins: Details US involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War.
 - Air America: The Story of the CIA's Secret Airlines by Christopher Robbins: Focuses on the infamous gun and drug-running activities of the CIA in Laos .
 - Tragic Mountains : The Hmong, the Americans and the Secret Wars for Laos , 1942-1992 by Jane Hamilton-Merritt: Follows the Hmong's successive struggles against the Japanese, the Viet Minh, the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese.
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