

## COUNTRY INFORMATION, FACTS & ADVICE

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### Laos

Laos is a landlocked country, sharing its borders with China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Seventy percent of the nation's land consists of mountains and plateaus while the mighty Mekong River flows across the entire length of the country, serving as a natural border with Thailand. Laos is home to 68 different ethnic groups, which can be defined by three sub-categories: the Lao Loum who inhabit the lowlands, the Lao Theung who are semi-nomadic and are found in the lower mountain ranges and the Lao Soung hill tribes which originate from Myanmar, Tibet and southern China.

The capital city of Vientiane is a cosmopolitan city with beguiling boulevards lined with temples and French villas. Further north, the city of Luang Prabang inspires with its charming mix of traditional and French-Indochinese architecture. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage in 1995, the city was once the center of the Lan Xang kingdom and has a rich artistic and cultural history.

<b>Capital City:</b>	Vientiane
<b>Estimated Population:</b>	7 million people
<b>Total Area (square kilometers):</b>	237,955
<b>International Dialing Code:</b>	+856

### Getting into Laos

#### Passport & Visa Information

For most visitors, visas may be obtained on arrival at international airports or international border checkpoints. Passport holders from some African and Middle Eastern nations are required to obtain a visa from a Laos embassy prior to departure from their point of origin.

The visa on arrival is valid for a maximum stay of 30 days (single entry), and the following documents are required:

- A passport valid for more than six months with at least two blank pages
- A recent passport-size photograph
- A completed visa application form (the form can be obtained at the airport)
- Visa fee; USD 30-45, depending on applicant's nationality

Visa-free entry is available for visitors from the following nations:

- Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam (30 days)
- Japan, Luxembourg, Russia, South Korea and Switzerland (15 days)
- Brunei and Myanmar (14 days)

E-visas are also available for tourism purposes for single entry up to a maximum of 30 days. The e-visa application requires up to three days to process. Please check the list of eligible nations at <https://www.laosevisa.com/eligible-countries>.

*While we do our best to provide the most up-to-date information, visa requirements may change at short notice. Obtaining the correct visa is the responsibility of each passenger and Abercrombie & Kent will not be held accountable for any refusal upon entry. Therefore, we recommend that you check with your consulate or embassy for current visa information before leaving home.*

## **Arrival and Departure Formalities**

You are required to complete an arrival/departure form as well as a customs declaration form for immigration upon entering the country. The forms, as well as the visa application form for visa on arrival are usually available on the aircraft; please check with a flight attendant so that you can have them ready before landing.

### **Useful tips:**

- Check your passport expiry date and ensure it is valid for more than six months beyond the date of your expected return to your country.
- Ensure you have at least two blank pages in your passport prior to arrival in each country of your journey.
- Write the full details of your next of kin in your passport.
- Make two copies of your passport number, date and place of issue. Leave one copy at home and take the other with you but be sure to keep it in a safe place, separate from your passport.
- Bring along extra passport photos in case you are required to apply for a new visa or a replacement passport during your journey.
- Print all important documents and keep them handy, such as airline tickets and visa approval letters.
- If your passport is lost or stolen overseas, please contact your local Abercrombie & Kent representative or hotel staff. They will assist you in contacting the relevant embassy or consulate.
- Abercrombie & Kent can help arrange VIP and Fast Track services on arrival and departure (supplementary fees apply). Please check with your travel professional.

## **Early Hotel Check-in**

Although we will do our best to accommodate early arrivals, A&K cannot guarantee that your first-day hotel room will be available for immediate occupancy if you arrive on an early-morning flight.

## **Keeping Healthy in Laos**

### **Vaccinations**

Please consult your doctor for specific advice about your personal medical requirements and note the following advisories:

- Getting immunized against cholera, hepatitis A and B, tetanus, typhoid and tuberculosis and Japanese encephalitis is recommended.
- Malaria is present in some remote parts of Laos. There is little risk if traveling in the major cities or typical tourist destinations. If traveling to remote areas, please consult your doctor for advice about anti-malarial medication.
- Please note that dengue can be transmitted by mosquitoes in Laos, although cases tend to occur in more rural areas. To reduce the risk, avoid mosquito bites as much as possible; keep your arms and legs covered, use insect repellent and avoid perfumes, hairspray and other scented products.

### **Drinking Water**

Do not drink tap water in Cambodia and avoid ice in your drinks unless it is made from mineral water. A&K supplies clean bottled drinking water when you travel by private vehicle. Exercise caution when eating and drinking outside reputable hotels and restaurants and avoid eating fruit and vegetables if they have been peeled already. Seafood, dairy products and items such as mayonnaise should be consumed with care. Eating food from street vendors or unfamiliar local places is not recommended.

## Special Requirements

If you are on prescribed medication, ensure that you take a copy of your prescriptions in case of loss of supply. Be sure to pack enough medication in your hand luggage for the duration of your trip as it may not be available locally. It is important to keep it in its original packaging. Check with the relevant embassy or consulate that your medication is legal in the countries you plan to visit and find out whether you need to take a doctor's letter with you.

*Please advise A&K of any special dietary requirements or allergies at least six weeks prior to departure. Every effort will be made to comply with your request. Travelers with physical disabilities and those who require frequent or on-going medical attention should advise A&K of their situation at the time of booking or at the earliest possible opportunity.*

## Tipping

Tipping is not compulsory but is often expected in Laos. You are traveling on an independent itinerary and the cost of your program does not include gratuities. Tipping is a very personal matter and should you feel you would like to acknowledge the service provided, please consider the following as a rough guide, per person per day.

Type of Service	Group Size (Number of People)					
	1	2	3	4	5-9	10+
Tour Director	15.00	12.00	10.00	8.00	6.00	5.00
Guide	15.00	12.00	10.00	8.00	6.00	5.00
Driver	8.00	6.00	5.00	4.00	3.00	3.00
Hotel Porters	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00

**Please note:** Currency is in USD

*The above tipping guidelines are recommendations only and are not compulsory. Please use your own discretion in tipping, based on quality of service.*

## Restaurants

- Some restaurants add a 5% service charge to your bill.
- You may wish to add about 10% to the bill to show appreciation for the service, however this is not required or expected

## Taxis

Taxi drivers do not expect to be tipped but they appreciate the fare being rounded up.

## Talk the Talk

The official language in Laos is Lao. However, there are several dialects in various parts of the country and many ethnic groups speak their own languages. Due to a mixture of cultural influences, several other languages are also commonly spoken in Laos, including French, English, Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese. Nevertheless, learning a few words of the local language may come in handy.

English	Lao
Hello	Sabai dee
Goodbye	Sohk dee
Thank you	Khob chai
How are you?	Sabai dee bo?
Excuse me	Khor tord
How much?	Tao dai?
I don't understand	Bo khao chai
Beautiful	Suay ngam

## Weather

The best time to visit Laos is during the cooler, dry season from November to April. This also coincides with the peak travel period. The months between April and September may see higher temperatures and more rainfall, but this period also offers the best value for travel with fewer crowds. May is typically the hottest month of the year while June to October brings more humidity and rainfall.

## What to Pack

- Lightweight, comfortable cotton clothing is recommended for the warm weather in Laos
- A light jacket is recommended for occasional rainy weather or cooler evenings, particularly if traveling between November and February
- Avoid sheer clothing and pack long-sleeved shirts and long skirts or trousers for visiting temples, shrines and palaces where it is often a requirement to cover the shoulders and knees
- Smart-casual wear for dining at more established restaurants
- Good walking shoes or sandals; keep in mind that you may be required to remove footwear when visiting religious sites
- A sunhat or umbrella, water bottle, sunscreen, sunglasses and insect repellent
- Universal travel adaptor; Laos uses 230V 50Hz with sockets fit for plug types A, B or C

## Religion & Etiquette

### Religion

The majority of the Lao people are Theravada Buddhists. Many Laotian men train at Buddhist monasteries before entering secular life. Other religions practiced include various Christian denominations, Baha'I Faith and Islam. Animism is also widely practiced among ethnic groups.

### Greeting

Lao people will greet each other with a *nop*, which is putting the palms of the hands together as if in prayer. This gesture is typically performed when saying hello or goodbye, or as a sign of respect.

### **Cultural Etiquette**

The head is considered the most sacred part of the body, so it is considered rude to touch the head of another person. The feet are considered the lowliest part of the body and it is offensive to point your feet directly at a person or to put your feet on furniture.

### **Bargaining**

Bargaining is common practice when shopping at local markets in Laos, although it is not practiced in major department stores and shopping malls. Bargaining should be an enjoyable experience for both buyers and sellers. Remember to keep it light-hearted, be reasonable in your offer and meet the seller somewhere in the middle.

### **Photography**

Please ask permission before photographing local people, including young children. Photography is not permitted in some locations, such as museums and art galleries. Avoid taking photographs of government buildings and military personnel. If in doubt, ask your guide.

### **Waste Disposal**

Please help to keep the environment clean and dispose of any waste appropriately. Avoid littering and separate recyclables where possible.

### **Animal Welfare**

Abercrombie & Kent does not offer activities that are harmful to animals, such as riding on the backs of elephants. We work hard to ensure that the experiences we offer are positive and enriching for all involved. If you would like to engage in experiences with animals, please consult your guide for our socially responsible recommendations that do not put any animals at risk.

### **Child Safety Awareness**

Abercrombie & Kent is an advocate of the Friends International ChildSafe Movement. We believe that children from any background deserve an opportunity to learn and grow and should be protected from harmful or exploitative situations. We do not encourage giving money to beggars or children selling souvenirs as these activities incentivize the children to stop going to school. We also do not encourage visits to schools or orphanages, unless the activity has been adequately vetted and does not cause disruption to the children's education or daily life.

If you encounter a situation where you believe a child is at risk, please inform your guide who will be able to contact the relevant authorities or child safe organizations.

### **Responsible Travel**

Consider these simple tips to enhance your experience and have a more positive impact when traveling:

- Find out as much as possible about your destination; learning about the site's history, culture and environment can enhance the experience when you are there
- Learn a few words of the local language
- Pack light and limit excess trash
- Select accommodations, restaurants and activities that have clear goals and policies in relation to environmental impact, employment practices and sustainability objectives
- Buy local products and services
- Minimize your carbon footprint by using alternative transportation options or offsetting your carbon emissions
- Engage in local culture by eating local food, shopping at local markets and taking part in cultural festivals
- Connect with locals who can provide unique insights into the destination
- Leave the places you visit the way you found them; follow designated walking trails and do not remove archaeological or biological treasures from sites

- Bring your own fabric bag, washable straw, refillable water bottle or coffee mug, cutlery and reusable food container to reduce the consumption of single-use plastics; look for water refill stations at #RefillMyBottle or #RefillNotLandfill
- Share your responsible travel tips and help spread the word about best practices in sustainable travel
- Explore more and continue learning about other fascinating places to visit

## Money

### Currency

The national currency in Laos is the Lao Kip (LAK). However, US dollars and Thai baht are also widely accepted. Notes are issued in denominations of 100,000, 50,000, 20,000, 10,000, 5,000, 2,000, 1,000 and 500.

### Credit Cards

It is recommended that you carry some cash in local currency or US dollars as credit cards are generally not accepted in Laos, except at some well-established hotels and restaurants. Those that do accept credit cards will usually add a 3% surcharge.

### Traveler's Checks

Traveler's checks are not widely accepted but can be cashed at major banks in the main cities.

### Banks & ATMs

Normal banking hours are Monday to Friday from 08:30 to 15:30. ATMs are widely available in the major cities of Luang Prabang and Vientiane as well as some of the larger provincial towns.

### Time Zone

Laos is on GMT+7

## Shopping

Souvenirs can be a great way of keeping memories alive and staying connected with a special place that you visited. However, please think carefully about what you buy and consider the supply chain ethics of your purchases. Here are our tips for responsible travel shopping.

- **Purchase Selectively** - Purchasing local crafts is a great way of showing support for local artisans. Some sellers, however, resort to importing mass-produced items from foreign countries. Therefore, we recommend that you inspect your purchases carefully, be selective and ask questions about where the items came from.
- **Purchase Locally** - We recommend dining at locally-run establishments rather than at international franchise restaurants when you have the opportunity. Choosing restaurants that use locally grown ingredients instead of imported products helps to reduce your carbon footprint and is also a great way to immerse in the local food culture.
- **Purchase Responsibly** - Avoid buying counterfeit items and ensure that the item you are purchasing is not stolen or taken without permission from a historical site. Insist on documentation to support the legitimacy of the item and its history.

### Ethical Souvenirs

Abercrombie & Kent does not encourage the trade of culturally sensitive souvenirs that may result in negative impacts to the community, culture or nature. To help you make more informed decisions, here is a guide to souvenirs to look out for in Laos as well as items you may want to avoid.

### **What to Buy**

- Woven textiles such as silks, cottons and other fabrics; some of Laos' small, remote communities produce high quality silks and cottons
- The Lao traditional dress, or *phaa sin*, which is a wraparound skirt adorned with a silver belt worn by women
- Gold and silver jewelry, particularly hand-crafted pieces from hill tribe communities; please note that some silver and copper items are subject to export tax, according to weight
- Handmade products carved from wood or stone by local artisans

### **What Not to Buy**

- Antique products that are over 40 years old, Buddha images and other cultural artifacts are prohibited from being taken out of the country; any legitimate purchases of antique items must be declared upon departure and any antique items that were purchased in another country must be declared to customs on arrival in Laos
- Elephant tusks (ivory) and other products made from animal horns or bones
- Products made from endangered animals, such as bags, purses or jewelry made from tortoise shells, pangolin scales, peacock feathers and snakeskin

### **Useful Tips:**

- Take your purchases home with you wherever possible to avoid complications with additional shipping fees, customs duties and regulations. Airfreight and shipments can sometimes take several months to arrive.
- Avoid purchasing expensive items unless you are certain of its quality and value. Some vendors may overstate the value of their goods. While our guides will try to assist wherever possible, they are not authorities on antiques or rare items.
- Take the time to read credit card slips and calculate the exchange rate before signing.
- Retain receipts of your purchases as you may be asked to provide proof of purchase to local officials when exiting the country. You may also need to present it to customs on your return home.

*If you are looking for a specific item, your guide may help refer you to a vendor that carries the item. However, this should not be taken as an endorsement of the vendor. All purchases are your own responsibility and A&K does not accept liability for products that are found to be faulty or not as advertised. A&K does not take responsibility for any loss or damage during shipment.*

### **Local Food & Drink**

Lao cuisine shares many similarities with that of its neighbor, Thailand. The dishes are dry, spicy and delicious. Traditionally, dishes are served with sticky rice and eaten with the fingers. It is common for people to eat communally, sharing several dishes at the table and, particularly in the countryside, to sit on the floor.

A typical Lao dish is *laap*, a salad made from ground meat (often chicken or duck) mixed with herbs, spices and finely crushed grains of rice. *Tam mak houn* is another common dish made of sliced papaya, garlic, chili, peanuts, sugar, fermented fish sauce and lime juice. In northern Laos, *khao soi* is also popular - a thick soup served with rice noodles.

*If you have any special dietary requirements, please advise Abercrombie & Kent at least six weeks prior to departure. Every effort is made to accommodate your request, but please be aware that this may not always be possible, particularly in remote areas.*