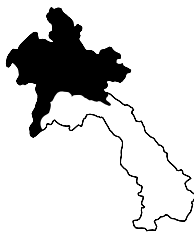


Northern Laos



NORTHERN LAOS

Northern Laos' majestic curves rise in steep green folds from the earth and layer the terrain with cliffs, mountains and high plateaus. Their formidable bulk hinders modernity and access, and preserves much of the mystique that attracts visitors to Laos in the first place. Villages along the mighty Mekong and the subdued Nam Ou and Nam Tha waterways still cling to river transport and the pockets of unexplored territory are vast. This striking natural heritage has greatly influenced the country's human history. While lowland Lao migrants favoured the flatter, rice-friendly river plains of central and southern Laos, hill-tribe cultures from the more rugged territories of Tibet and southwestern China found the mountainous north suitable for small-scale farming of corn and opium, and the raising of domestic animals.

If you're a fugitive from routine, northern Laos provides ample hiding spots. Isolation is thick in this part of Southeast Asia and the rich ethnic diversity of the region thrives as a result. The opportunities to acquaint yourself with homestays, hilltop tribes and traditional village life are profuse. Big ticket attractions include exquisite Luang Prabang, the archaeological Plain of Jars and inspiring ecotrekking in Luang Nam Tha, which has received support from the UN and accolades from around the world. As more of the area opens itself to tourism, less-visited gems like village exploration in remote Phongsali, and the haunting Vieng Xai caves of Hua Phan gain great attention. Throughout northern Laos cycling tours and rafting excursions (without the 'happy' pit stops) present themselves and for every organised activity there is an avenue to cater to DIY junkies.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Ecotrekking in the Luang Nam Tha's wonderful **Nam Ha NPA** (p198)
- Wat-hopping and market-shopping in regal **Luang Prabang** (p134)
- Navigating the Nam Ou on a slow boat north from **Nong Khiaw** (p160)
- Exploring Hua Phan's stunning landscape and haunting **Vieng Xai** caves (p187)
- Visiting tribal villages in remote **Phongsali** (p210)
- Taking an archaeological amble through Xieng Khuang's **Plain of Jars** (p169)
- Taking the river less-travelled and slow-boat-ing through **Sainyabuli** down to Vientiane (p220)



Climate

Because mountainous northern Laos has higher overall elevations than the rest of the country, and sits at higher latitudes as well, it generally boasts the coolest temperatures. In the short cool season – roughly late November through to mid-February – temperatures can easily fall into the single digits at night. During the hot season – March through to May – the more mountainous provinces (particularly Luang Nam Tha, Phongsali, Xieng Khuang and Hua Phan) are a good choice if you want to avoid the stifling heat of the Mekong River plains.

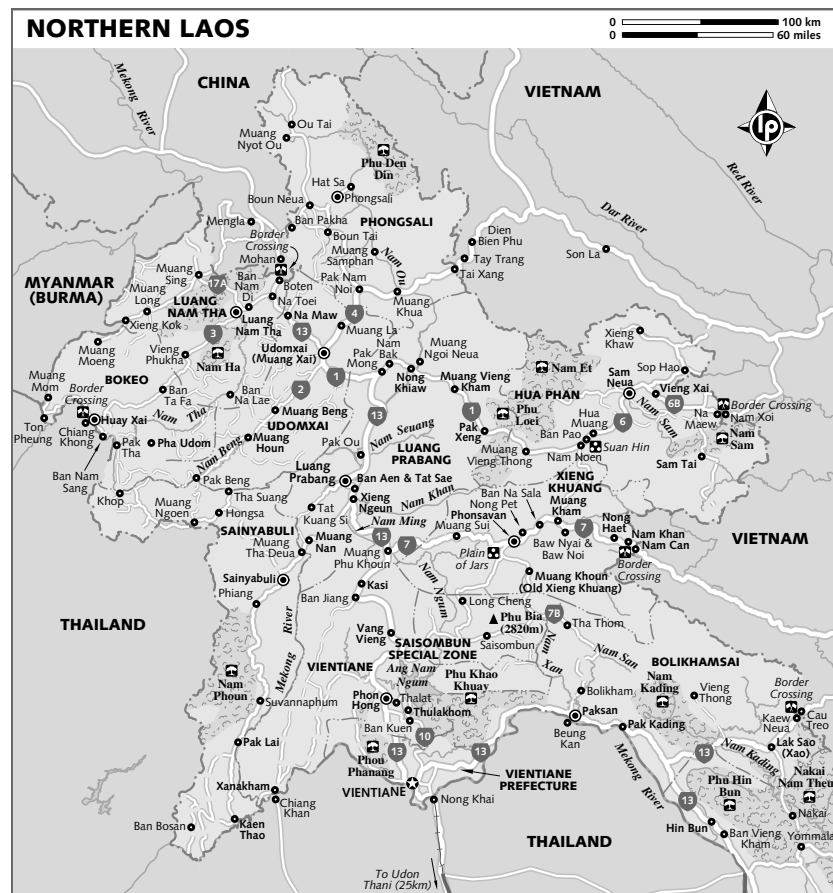
The annual southwest monsoon season generally runs a bit shorter in the north, so that while in Si Phan Don (southern Laos)

it may still be raining in October, in Luang Nam Tha and Udomxai the rainy season may be finished. The northeastern provinces of Hua Phan and Phongsali, on the other hand, often receive rain from Vietnam and China during the northeastern monsoon (from November to February) while the rest of the north is dry.

Getting There & Around

Many visitors enter northern Laos via Thailand at Huay Xai (p214), then make their way southeastward to Luang Prabang and Vientiane from here. Others come northward by bus from Vientiane (p86), and yet others fly to Luang Prabang (see p134) from Bangkok or Chiang Mai in Thailand. You

NORTHERN LAOS



can also fly to some northern cities – namely Luang Prabang, Phonsavan, Udomxai, Luang Nam Tha and Sam Neua – from Vientiane.

Boat travel along the Mekong River is a popular way of moving between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang, and less so between Luang Prabang and Phongsali. The most common means of interprovincial transport in the north is public bus. Bus trips around the north can be quite slow due to the steep and winding nature of the roadways as well as the conditions of the roads themselves.

Sáwngtháew (pick-up trucks fitted with benches in the back for passengers) do the job in less populated areas. These can often be chartered for between 10 and 15 times the individual passenger fare.

Some people travel the north by bicycle or motorcycle now that the government has loosened restrictions on the hire of two-wheeled vehicles. Car hire is also an option, although the only cities where hire cars are readily available are Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

LUANG PRABANG PROVINCE

Luang Prabang Province possesses one of Northern Laos' most diverse landscapes. In the west, the Mekong cuts through dense jungle and lines it with sandy banks. The south is dominated by awesome massifs climbing north from Vientiane and the Nam Ou (Ou River) voyages north from the city of Luang Prabang, humbled by sheer cliffs of karst around Nong Khiaw and Muang Ngoi Neua. In the east, Rte 7 ambles towards Xieng Khuang Province and the scenery gives way to soft hills of tawny brown.

Travellers head here for a few days and end up spending a few weeks exploring the beguiling topography. Access through the province is comparatively easy and all roads lead to and from Luang Prabang city, one of Laos' highlights. With Rte 13 almost fully sealed, putting the province within a day's drive of China as well as Vientiane, Luang Prabang is well on its way to becoming one of the country's richest provinces.

Luang Prabang harbours 12 ethnicities, of whom nearly half are Lao Thoeng, 40% Lao Loum and the remainder Lao Soung.

LUANG PRABANG

ຫລວງພະບາງ

☎ 071 / pop 26,000

Colour is the first of Luang Prabang's virtues to greet travellers. Pearly frangipanis with their heady perfume, banks of overgrown trees peppered with scarlet flowers, the burnt sienna robes of hundreds of monks and their novices, and resplendent gold and claret wats. The scent of fresh coffee, river activity, produce markets and spicy food soon follows. And then the broader aesthetics begin to unfold. Encircled by mountains, and set 700m above sea level at the confluence of the Nam Khan (Khan River) and the Mekong River, Luang Prabang is now Laos' foremost tourist showpiece. The brew of gleaming temple roofs, crumbling French provincial architecture and multiethnic inhabitants captivates even the most jaded travellers, and the quiet benevolence of the city's residents lulls them into a somnambulant bliss.

Sealed highways linking Luang Prabang with Thailand and China have turned the city into an important relay point for commerce between the three countries. City governors have wisely provided a road bypass system that gives the city centre a wide berth. Thus the sense of calm antiquity that first brought visitors to the city when Laos opened to tourism in 1989 has been well preserved. Moreover, the city is Unesco Heritage listed, which means a blessed ban on buses and trucks. Most road activity consists of bicycles or motorcycles, but an even score simply go by foot. Although the city teems with travellers, it is not a party destination, and the 11.30pm curfew silences the city by midnight and maintains its traditional disposition.

History

Early Thai-Lao *meuang* (city-states) established themselves in the high river valleys along the Mekong River and its major tributaries, the Nam Khan, the Nam Ou and the Nam Seuang, sometime between the 8th and 13th centuries. During the ascendance of the Chenla kingdom, centred in southern Laos and northern Cambodia between the 6th and 8th centuries, Luang Prabang became known as Muang Sawa, the Lao rendering of 'Java'. It is likely this name referred to Javanese sponsorship in Chenla. The Khmer-supported conqueror Fa Ngum consolidated the first Lao kingdom, Lan Xang Hom Khao (Million Elephants, White Parasol), here in 1353.

Four years later the name was changed to Xiang Dong Xiang Thong (City of Gold), and under Fa Ngum's son, King Samsenthai, the kingdom flourished. In 1512 his successor, King Visoun, accepted a celebrated Buddha image – the Pha Bang – as a gift from the Khmer monarchy, and the city-state became known as Luang (Great or Royal) Phabang (Prabang). Luang Prabang remained the capital of Lan Xang until King Phothisarath moved the administrative seat to Vientiane in 1545.

Even after the capital moved to Vientiane, Luang Prabang remained the main source of monarchical power throughout the Lan Xang period. When Lan Xang broke up following the death of King Suriya Vongsa in 1694, one of Suriya's grandsons set up an independent kingdom in Luang Prabang, which competed with kingdoms in Vientiane and Champasak.

From then on, the Luang Prabang monarchy was so weak that it was forced to pay tribute at various times to the Siamese, Burmese and Vietnamese. After a destructive attack by the Black Flag wing of the Chinese Haw in 1887, the Luang Prabang kingdom chose to accept French protection, and a French commissariat was established in the royal capital.

The French allowed Laos to retain the Luang Prabang monarchy and imported Vietnamese workers to erect the brick-and-stucco offices and villas that give the city its faded colonial atmosphere. Luang Prabang quickly became a favourite post for French colonials seeking a refuge as far away from Paris as possible – even during French Indochina's last years, prior to WWII, a river trip from Saigon to Luang Prabang took longer than a steamship voyage from Saigon to France.

The Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia during WWII weakened France's grip on Luang Prabang, and in 1945 Laos declared its independence from France. France, for its part, stubbornly insisted that Laos remained part of the French Union, and they did until the 1954 Vietnamese triumph over the French at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam.

When the penultimate Luang Prabang king, Sisavang Vong, died in 1959, his son Crown Prince Sisavang Vatthana was scheduled to ascend the throne. According to official Pathet Lao (PL) history, the 1975 revolution prevented the prince's actual coronation, though many Lao and foreign diplomats insist he was crowned before the PL deposed him. At any rate, after two years as 'Supreme Adviser to

the President', King (or Crown Prince?) Sisavang Vatthana and his wife were exiled to Hua Phan Province, where they were imprisoned and died, one by one, from lack of adequate food and medical care between 1977 and 1981. The Lao PDR government has yet to issue a full report on the royal family's whereabouts following the Revolution.

By the time Laos finally reopened to tourism in 1989, after the fall of the USSR and Soviet bloc governments, Luang Prabang had become a ghost of its former self due to collectivisation of the economy and the resulting exodus of nearly 100,000 businesspeople, aristocracy and intelligentsia. Over the next decade, however, as the Lao government legalised private enterprise, long-closed shops reopened and dilapidated villas were converted into hotels and guesthouses. Restaurants, handicraft shops and art galleries sprang up on practically every corner of the formerly comatose city.

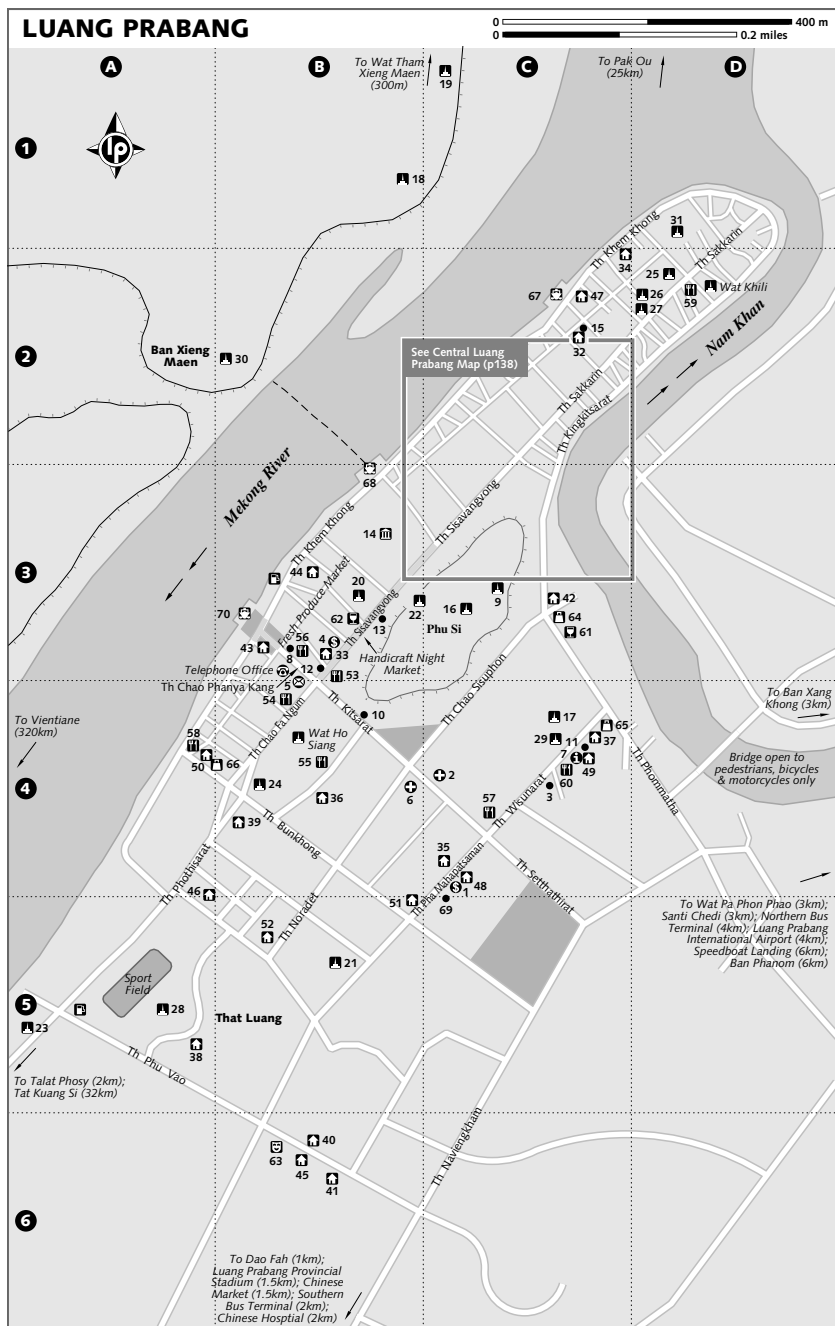
The placing of the city on Unesco's World Heritage list in 1995 has played a major role in preserving and enhancing historic architecture, and in raising the city's international profile.

Orientation

Most of the longer roadways through Luang Prabang parallel the river. Shorter roads – once mere footpaths – bisect the larger roads and lead to the riverbanks, serving as dividing lines between different villages. Each village is named for its local wat, eg Ban Khili for Wat Khili, Ban Ho Xiang for Wat Ho Xiang. On the west side of the river, opposite the royal city, is a village called Ban Xieng Maen (not to be confused with the similarly named Ban Xieng Muan on the east side).

A large hill called Phu Si (sometimes spelt Phousi or Phousy) dominates the town skyline, standing towards the middle of the peninsula formed by the confluence of the two rivers. Since it is visible from any point in town, Phu Si serves as a very helpful 'beacon' for orientating yourself. Most of the historic temples are located between Phu Si and the Mekong, while the trading district lies to the south of the hill. Virtually the whole town can be seen on foot in a day or two, though many visitors extend their stay in order to soak up the atmosphere.

The official street names in Luang Prabang have changed at least three times over the



INFORMATION		Wat Sirimungkhun.....26 D2	EATING 🍴
Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur	Wat Sop.....27 D2	Baguette Stalls.....53 B3	JoMa Bakery Cafe.....54 B4
Lao.....1 C4	Wat That Luang.....28 A5	Mr Hong's Coffeeshop & Restaurant.....55 B4	Night Stalls.....56 B3
Chinese Hospital.....2 C4	Wat Wisunarat (Wat Visoun).....29 C4	Paradise Restaurant.....57 C4	Somchanh Restaurant.....58 A4
Immigration & Foreigners Management.....3 C4	Wat Xieng Kang.....(see 21)	Tum Tum Cheng Restaurant.....59 D2	Visoun Restaurant.....60 C4
Lao Development Bank.....4 B3	Wat Xieng Maen.....30 B2		
Post Office.....5 B4	Wat Xieng Thong.....31 D1		
Provincial Hospital.....6 B4			
Provincial Tourism Department.....7 C4			
SLEEPING 🛏			
Action Max Laos.....8 B3	Ammata Guest House.....32 C2		
Cave Shrine (Wat Tham Phu Si).....9 C3	Ancient Luang Prabang Hotel.....33 B3		
Children's Cultural Centre.....10 B4	Auberge Le Calao.....34 C2		
Lao Red Cross.....11 C4	Jaliya Guest House.....35 C4	DRINKING 🍷	
Lao Youth Travel.....12 B3	Koun Savan Guest House.....36 B4	Martin's Pub.....61 C3	
Phousi Massage.....13 B3	Lane Xang Guest House.....37 C4	Nao's Place.....62 B3	
Royal Palace Museum.....14 B3	Le Parasol Blanc Hotel.....38 A5		
Spa Garden.....15 C2	Maison Souvannaphoum.....39 B4	ENTERTAINMENT 🎪	
That Chomsri.....16 C3	Maniphone Guest House.....40 B6	Muangsua Hotel.....63 B6	
Tum Tum Cheng Restaurant.....(see 59)	Manoluck Hotel.....41 B6	Royal Theatre.....(see 14)	
Wat Aham.....17 C4	Merry Lao Swiss Hotel.....42 C2	SHOPPING 🛍	
Wat Chom Phet.....18 B1	Oudomphone Guest House.....43 B3	Kopnoi.....64 C3	
Wat Long Khun.....19 C1	Pakam Guest House.....44 B3	Pathana Boupha Antique House.....65 C4	
Wat Mai Suwannaphumham.....20 B3	Sanakeo Guest House.....45 B6	Thitpheng Maniphone.....66 B4	
Wat Pa Huak.....22 B3	Satri House.....46 A4		
Wat Pha Baht Tai.....23 A5	Sayo River Guest House.....47 C2	TRANSPORT	
Wat Pha Mahathat (Wat That).....24 B4	Thavisouk Guest House.....48 C4	Charter Boat Pier.....67 C2	
Wat Si Bun Heuang.....25 D2	Thony II Guest House.....49 C4	Ferry Boat Pier.....68 B3	
	Vanvisa Guest House.....50 A4	Lao Airlines.....69 C5	
	Villa Kiengkham.....51 B5	Long-Distance Ferries.....70 B3	
	Villa Suan Maak.....52 B5		

last decade, so you'll find that naming varies widely on city maps and address cards.

Currently the main street heading north-east up the peninsula is called Th Phothisarat (Phothisalat according to the modern Lao spelling) at its southwestern end, Th Sisavangvong in its middle reach and Th Sakkarin towards the northeastern end. Th Sakkarin (Sakkalin) is also sometimes known as Th Xieng Thong. The road that runs along the Mekong waterfront is variously known as Souvannakhamphong, Oun Kham and Suvannablang, although most locals call it Th Khem Khong. When giving directions, the locals fortunately almost never quote street names, using landmarks instead.

The airport, speedboat landing and northern bus terminal are all northeast of the city, while the southern bus terminal is to the southwest.

Information BOOKSHOPS

L'Étranger Books & Tea (Map p138; booksinlaos@yahoo.com; Th Kingkitsarat; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) New and used books about Laos and Southeast Asia, plus book rental and books bought for cash or trade credit. Art is showcased on the 2nd floor, which doubles as a tea lounge.

EMERGENCY

- Ambulance** (☎ 195)
- Fire** (☎ 190)
- Police** (☎ 191, 212158)

IMMIGRATION

Numerous travel agents in town can arrange visa extensions for US\$4 per day. You need to organise this before your visa has expired. **Immigration & Foreigners Management** (Map p136; ☎ 212435; Th Wisunarat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Staff here can deal with any immigration problems you might have.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet cafés scattered along Th Sisavangvong in the historic district, all of which charge 300 kip per minute. Le Café Ban Vat Sene (p152) has wireless access if you've got your own laptop.

Good broadband access can be found at: **Internet Shop** (Map p138; Th Sakkarin; ☎ 8am-11pm) **Treasure Travel Laos** (Map p138; ☎ 245403; Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 7am-11pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Visitors with serious injuries or illnesses are almost always flown to Vientiane for emergency transit to hospitals in northeastern Thailand, or

NORTHERN LAOS

NORTHERN LAOS

put on direct flights to Chiang Mai or Bangkok. There are some services in the area:

Boua Phanh Pharmacie (Map p138; ☎ 252252; Th Sakkarin) One of the better pharmacies in town.

Chinese Hospital (Map p136; ☎ 254026; Ban Phu Mok) Modern medical equipment and supplies, but sometimes short of trained personnel.

Provincial Hospital (Map p136; ☎ 252049, 212123; Th Setthathirath) Neither this hospital nor the Chinese hospital receive high marks from foreign medical observers.

MONEY

Several tour companies on Th Sisavangvong offer cash advances from a Visa or MasterCard. The exchange rates usually match those of the banks and the commission is around 3%.

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao Central Luang Prabang (BCEL; Map p138; Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8.30am–3.30pm Mon–Sat); Luang Prabang (BCEL; Map p136; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; ☎ 8.30am–3.30pm Mon–Sat) Will exchange Thai baht, US, Australian and Canadian dollars, euros and UK pounds – cash or travellers cheques – for kip. The bank normally won't change in the other direction because of a claimed shortage of these currencies. BCEL also offers cash advances, in kip only, for Visa and MasterCard.

Lao Development Bank (Map p136; 65 Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8.30am–3.30pm Mon–Sat) Foreign exchange services; does not accept credit cards.

POST

Post office (Map p136; crnr Th Chao Fa Ngum & Th Kitsarat; ☎ 8.30am–3.30pm Mon–Fri, to noon Sat)

CENTRAL LUANG PRABANG

0 100 m 0.1 mile

INFORMATION

- Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao.....1 B3
- Boua Phanh Pharmacie.....2 B2
- Heuanchan.....3 A2
- Internet Shop.....4 B2
- L'Étranger Books & Tea.....5 B4
- Treasure Travel Laos.....6 A3

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Aroma Spa.....7 B2
- Asian Oasis.....8 C2
- Big Brother Mouse.....9 A2
- Green Discovery.....10 A3
- Khmu Spa.....11 C1
- Tamarind.....(see 51)
- Tamnak Lao Three Elephant Cafe.....(see 52)

EATING

- Café des Artes.....35 B3
- Café Toui.....36 B2

DRINKING

- Hive Bar.....56 B4
- Lao Lao Garden.....(see 41)
- Lemongrass.....57 A1
- LPO.....58 C4

ENTERTAINMENT

- Le Cinema.....59 A3
- L'Étranger Books & Tea.....(see 5)

SHOPPING

- Atelier 15 Nagas Studio.....60 B1
- Caruso Lao Handicraft.....61 B2
- Fibre2Fabric.....62 B1
- Naga Creations.....63 B3
- OckPopTok.....64 A3

SLEEPING

- Apsara.....20 C1
- Auberge les 3 Nagas.....21 C1
- Ban Pack Luck.....22 B1
- Choumkhong Guest House.....23 A2
- Kongsavath Guest House.....24 B1
- Mala Guest House.....25 A3
- Sackkarinh Guest House.....26 B2
- Sala Prabang.....27 A1
- Sala Prabang.....28 A2
- Saynamkhan Hotel.....29 C2
- Sayo Guest House.....30 A2
- Thatsaphone Guest House.....31 A3
- Villa Santi.....32 C2
- Villa Sokkai.....33 D1
- Xieng Mouane Guest House.....34 A2

RESTAURANTS & CAFÉS

- CT Bakery Restaurant.....37 A3
- Fruit Shake Restaurant.....38 D1
- Khemkhong View Restaurant.....39 A2
- Lala Café.....40 C1
- Lao Lao Garden.....41 B3
- Le Café Ban Vat Sene.....42 C2
- Morning Glory Café.....43 D1
- Naunapha Restaurant.....44 B3
- Nazim Indian Food.....45 B2
- Nisha Restaurant.....46 A2
- Phousi Café & Gallery.....47 C3
- Restaurant Brasserie L'Éléphant.....48 B1
- Restaurant Luang Prabang Bakery.....49 A4
- Scandinavian Bakery.....50 B3
- Tamarind.....51 B1
- Tamnak Lao Three Elephant Cafe.....52 C2
- Tum Tum Bamboo Restaurant.....53 B2
- View Khaem Khong Restaurant.....54 A1
- Yongkhone Restaurant.....55 A3

OTHER SERVICES

- Tiger Trails.....12 A3
- View Massage.....13 A2
- Wat Choumkhong.....14 A2
- Wat Nong Sikhunmeuang.....15 B1
- Wat Pa Phai.....16 B2
- Wat Pha Phutthabhat.....17 B3
- Wat Sensoukarahm.....18 C1
- Wat Xieng Muan.....19 A2
- 33 43 38
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TELEPHONE

Most internet cafés in town have Skype and MSN Messenger on their computers, which enable you to make cheap or free international internet phone calls if you have an account. Alternatively, they offer international phone calls for 2000 kip per minute.

Domestic and international phone calls can be made at a window inside the post office (opposite), down a corridor, to the right inside the entrance, and at a phonecard booth at the front of the post office. Cards may be purchased inside the post office or at sundries shops around town.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Provincial Tourism Department (Map p136; ☎ 212487; Th Wisunarat) This office, opposite Wat Wisunarat, stocks a few brochures but in general is of limited use to most visitors. Opening hours are unposted and erratic.

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE INFORMATION

Heuanchan (Villa Xiengmouane, Ban Xieng Mouane; Map p138; ☎ 9am–6pm) The Heritage Information Centre of Luang Prabang contains posted public information on the Unesco project being conducted in Luang Prabang.

Dangers & Annoyances

During the late dry season – roughly from February to May – the air over Luang Prabang can become very smoky due to slash-and-burn agriculture in the hills and mountains around the city. It becomes so bad in March and April that even local residents will complain of red, watery eyes and breathing difficulties. Landscape photography is hopeless, except on the rare day when a strong breeze flushes out the smoke from the valley. With the arrival of rain in late May or June, the air clears and generally stays that way until the following year. One hopes the authorities will get a handle on the situation before all the surrounding forests are gone, and extensive erosion and flooding result.

Sights

ROYAL PALACE MUSEUM (HO KHAM)

ຫ້ວງພິດທະພັນພະລາດສະວັງ(ຫ້ຄຳ)

Start your tour of Luang Prabang with a visit to this quaint museum to get a sense of local history. You need to be appropriately dressed to enter, which means having your shoulders covered and no shorts. The **Royal Palace Museum** (Haw Kham or Golden Hall; Map p136; ☎ 212470; Th Sisavangvong; admission US\$2; ☎ 8–11am & 1.30–4pm) was

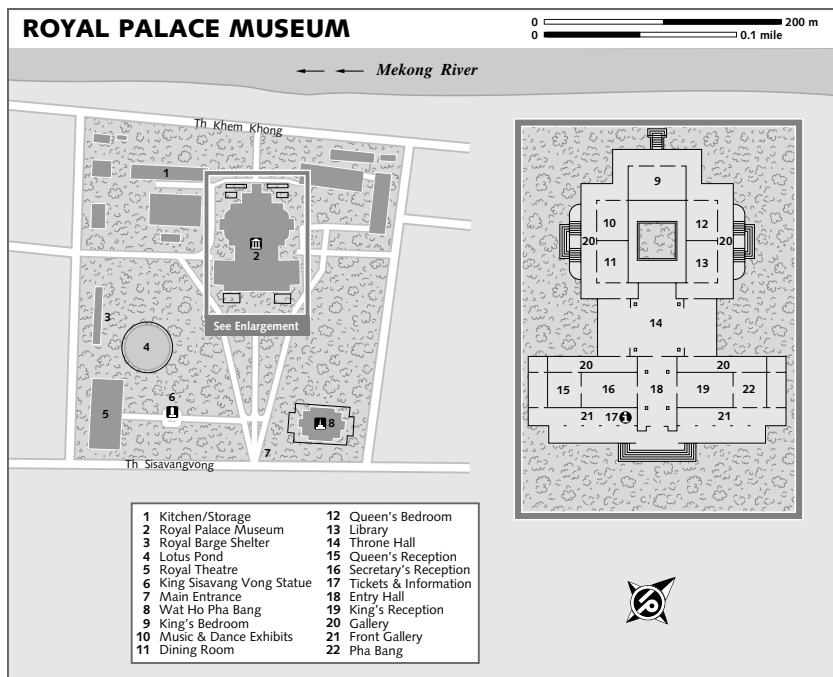
built in 1904 during the early French colonial era as a residence for King Sisavang Vong and his family. The site for the palace was chosen so that official visitors to Luang Prabang could disembark from their river journeys directly below the palace and be received there.

Architecturally, the building features a blend of traditional Lao motifs and French beaux-arts styles, and has been laid out in a double-cruciform shape with the entrance on one side of the lower crossbar. The steps leading to the entrance are Italian marble. Most of the private chambers of the royal family have been preserved since the day the Pathet Lao forced the royals into exile. Many locals believe the palace to be haunted by the spirits of the royal family, and few Lao will venture into the building after dark.

The large entry hall displays royal religious objects, including the dais of the former Supreme Patriarch of Lao Buddhism; an ancient Buddha head presented to the king as a gift from India; a reclining Buddha with the unusual added feature of sculpted mourners at his side; an equally uncommon seated Buddha with a begging bowl (the bowl is usually only depicted with a standing figure); and a Luang Prabang-style standing Buddha sculpted of marble in a 'Contemplating the Bodhi Tree' pose.

To the right of the entry hall is the king's reception room, where busts of the Lao monarchy are displayed along with two large, gilded and lacquered Ramayana screens crafted by local artisan Thit Tanh. The walls of the room are covered with murals that depict scenes from traditional Lao life. French artist Alix de Fautreau painted these in 1930, intending that each wall be viewed at a different time of day – according to the light that enters the windows on one side of the room – to correspond with the time of day depicted.

The front right corner room of the palace, open to the outside, contains a collection of the museum's most prized art, including the Pha Bang. Cast of a gold, silver and bronze alloy, this Buddha stands 83cm tall and is said to weigh 53.4kg. Legend has it the image was cast around the 1st century AD in Sri Lanka and later presented to Khmer King Phaya Sirichantha, who in turn gave it to King Fa Ngum in 1359 (other accounts have it that his successor, King Visoun, received it in 1512) as a Buddhist legitimiser of Lao sovereignty. Since stylistically it's obviously



of Khmer origin, its casting most likely took place nearer to the latter date. The Siamese twice carried the image off to Thailand (in 1779 and 1827) but it was finally restored to Lao hands by King Mongkut (Rama IV) in 1867. Persistent rumours claim that the actual image on display is a copy and that the original is stored in a vault either in Vientiane or Moscow. The 'real' one supposedly features a bit of gold leaf over the eyes and a hole drilled through one ankle.

Also in this room are large elephant tusks engraved with Buddhas, including Khmer-crafted sitting Buddhas and Luang Prabang-style standing Buddhas; an excellent Lao frieze taken from a local temple; and three beautiful *saew mai khan* (embroidered silk screens with religious imagery) that were crafted by the queen.

To the left of the entry hall, the secretary's reception room is filled with paintings, silver and china that have been presented to Laos as diplomatic gifts from Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Japan, Vietnam, China, Nepal, the USA, Canada and Australia. The objects are

grouped according to whether they're from 'socialist' or 'capitalist' countries.

The next room to the left was once the queen's reception room. Large royal portraits of King Sisavang Vatthana, Queen Kham Phouy and Crown Prince Vong Savang, painted by the Russian artist Ilya Glazunov in 1967, are hung on the walls. Also on display in this room are friendship flags from China and Vietnam, and replicas of sculpture from New Delhi's Indian National Museum.

Behind the entry hall is the throne hall where royal vestments, gold and silver sables, and the king's elephant chair (or saddle) are exhibited. Glass cases hold a collection of small Buddhas made of crystal and gold that were found inside the That Makmo (Makmo Stupa). Intricate wall mosaics, placed on a deep red background, took eight craftsmen 3½ years to complete and are a highlight of the palace's art.

Beyond the throne room are the halls or galleries that lead to the royal family's residential quarters. The royal bedrooms have been preserved as they were when the king

departed, as have the dining hall and a room that contains royal seals and medals. One of the more interesting displays in the museum is a room in the residential section that now contains Lao classical musical instruments and masks for the performance of Ramayana dance-drama – just about the only place in the country where you see these kinds of objects on display.

Towards the southeastern corner of the compound stands a large, unlabelled bronze statue of King Sisavang Vong. Behind the statue is a palace building now designated as the **Royal Theatre**. See p154 for more information.

Wat Ho Pha Bang

A project planned before the monarchy was abolished in 1975, construction on this highly ornate pavilion began in 1993. Upon completion the highly revered Pha Bang will be moved from palace museum to an altar in the centre of the pavilion.

WAT XIENG THONG

ວັດຊຶງທອງ

Near the northern tip of the peninsula formed by the Mekong River and the Nam Khan is Luang Prabang's most magnificent temple, **Wat Xieng Thong** (Map p136; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am–5pm). King Setthathirat ordered the construction of Wat Xieng Thong's *sim* (ordination hall) in 1560, and the compound remained under royal patronage until 1975. Like the royal palace, Wat Xieng Thong was placed within easy reach of the Mekong. The *haw tai* (Tripitaka library) was added in 1828, and the *haw kawng* (drum tower) in 1961.

Along with Wat Mai Suwannaphumamah, this was the only Luang Prabang wat spared by the 1887 Black Flag Haw sacking of the city. The Black Flag's leader, Deo Van Tri (a Thai Khao or White Thai from the north Vietnam province of Lai Chau), had studied here as a monk earlier in his life, and he used the desecrated, if not destroyed, temple as his headquarters during the invasion.

BUN PI MAI LAO (LAO NEW YEAR)

In the middle of April the three-day Songkan (Water Festival) celebrates the start of Lao New Year. Songkan, from the Sanskrit *samkranta* (fully passed over), signifies the passage of the sun from the zodiac sign of Pisces into Aries. All of Laos observes this festival, but it is particularly well celebrated in Luang Prabang, where many people dress in traditional clothes for the major events and stretch the event out to a full seven days.

On a spiritual level, the Lao traditionally believe that during this period the old Songkan spirit departs and the new one arrives. On the first day of the festival, when the old spirit departs, people give their homes a thorough cleaning. At Hat Muang Khoun, a Mekong River island beach near Ban Xieng Maen, locals gather to build and decorate miniature sand stupas for good luck, amid much playful throwing of river water. On the second day, civic groups mount a colourful, costumed parade down Luang Prabang's main avenue from Wat Pha Mahathat to Wat Xieng Thong. The third day is a 'rest day', when all parading stops and the devout take time to wash Buddha images at their local wat.

In the early morning of the fourth day, people climb Phu Si to make offerings of sticky rice at the summit stupa. Then in the afternoon they participate in *bqasii* (sacred string-tying) ceremonies with family and friends. On the fifth day the Pha Bang (the Khmer-style standing Buddha figure) leaves the Royal Palace Museum, where it's kept, and is taken to Wat Mai Suwannaphumamah (Wat Mai) in a solemn procession, while on the sixth day the new spirit arrives. This day is considered especially crucial, and cleansing rituals extend to the bathing of Buddhist holy images – particularly the Pha Bang, in a temporary pavilion erected in front of Wat Mai – by pouring water onto them through wooden sluice pipes shaped like *naga* (mythical water serpents). Senior monks receive a similar treatment, and younger Lao will also pour water over the hands (palms held together) of their elderly relatives in a gesture of respect. On the last day, a final procession carries the Pha Bang from Wat Mai back to the museum.

Although the true meaning of the festival is kept alive by ceremonies such as these, nowadays it's mainly a festival of fun. As in Thailand and Myanmar, this is the height of the hot, dry season, and the locals revel in being able to douse one another with cold water to cool off. Foreigners are not exempt from the soaking, so watch out!

The *sim* represents what is considered classic Luang Prabang temple architecture, with roofs that sweep low to the ground. The rear wall of the *sim* features an impressive 'tree of life' mosaic set in a red background. Inside, the elaborately decorated wooden columns support a ceiling stencilled in gold with *dhammachakka* (dharma wheels). Other gold-stencilled designs on the interior walls depict the exploits of legendary King Chanthaphanit, about whom there exists no verifiable written history.

To one side of the *sim*, towards the east, stand several *haw* (small halls) and stupas containing Buddha images of the period. The *haw tai pha sai-nyaat* (reclining Buddha sanctuary; dubbed La Chapelle Rouge – Red Chapel – by the French) contains an especially rare reclining Buddha that dates from the construction of the temple. This one-of-a-kind figure is exquisitely proportioned in classic Lao style (most Lao recliners imitate Thai or Lanna styles), with the monastic robes curling outward at the ankle like rocket fumes. Instead of merely supporting the head, the unique right-hand position extends away from the head in a simple but graceful gesture. In 1931 this image was taken to Paris and displayed at the Paris Exhibition, after which it was kept in Vientiane until its return to Luang Prabang in 1964.

Gold-leaf votives line the upper walls of the sanctuary on either side of the reclining image. In front of the image are several seated bronze Buddhas of different styles and ages, and on

either side of the altar are small embroidered tapestries depicting a stupa and a standing Buddha. A mosaic on the back exterior wall of this chapel was done in the late 1950s in commemoration of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's attainment of *parinibbana* (final nirvana, or passing away). The mosaic is unique in that it relates the exploits of Siaw Sawat, a hero from a famous Lao novel, along with scenes of local village life, rather than a religious scene.

Near the compound's eastern gate stands the *hohng kèp mien* (royal funerary carriage house). Inside is an impressive funeral carriage (crafted by local artisan Thit Tanh), standing 12m high, and various funeral urns for the members of the royal family. (The ashes of King Sisavang Vong, the queen and the king's brother, however, are not interred here but at Wat That Luang at the southern end of Luang Prabang.) Glass cabinets hold royal puppets that were once used for performances of *lakhawn lek* (traditional small puppet show). Gilt panels on the exterior of the chapel depict semierotic episodes from the Ramayana epic.

WAT WISUNARAT (WAT VISOUN)

ວັດວິສຸນະລາດ

Originally built in 1513 during the reign of Chao Wisunarat (King Visoun), **Wat Wisunarat** (Map p136; Th Wisunarat; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the oldest operating temple in Luang Prabang. It was rebuilt between 1896 and 1898 following an 1887 fire set by Black Flag Haw raiders. The original was wooden, and in the brick and stucco restoration the builders tried to make the balustraded windows of the *sim* appear to be fashioned of lathed wood (an old South Indian and Khmer contrivance that is uncommon in Lao architecture). The front roof that slopes sideways over the terrace is another unique feature. Inside the high-ceilinged *sim* is a collection of gilded wooden 'Calling for Rain' Buddhas and 15th- to 16th-century Luang Prabang *siimaa* (ordination-precinct stones). These were placed here by Prince Phetsarat after the Haw invasion. The Pha Bang was kept here from 1507 to 1715 and from 1867 to 1894.

Standing well in front of the *sim* – instead of in the usual spot for a large stupa, immediately behind the *sim* – stands the 34.5m That Pathum (Lotus Stupa). Locally the stupa is more commonly known as That Makmo (Watermelon Stupa) because of its semispherical

shape. Work on the stupa began in 1503 by order of Nang Phantin Xieng, wife of King Visoun, and was completed 19 months later. Workmen filled the interior of the stupa with small Buddha images made of precious materials and other sacred items. Many of these were stolen when the Haw destroyed the temple, while those recovered can be seen on display in the Royal Palace Museum. The stupa underwent reconstruction in 1895 and again in 1932 after a partial collapse due to rain.

WAT AHAM

ວັດອາຮາມ

Between Wat Wisunarat and the Nam Khan stands **Wat Aham** (Map p136; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm), formerly the residence of the Sangkharat (Supreme Patriarch of Lao Buddhism). Two large banyan trees grace the grounds, which are semideserted except for the occasional devotee who comes to make offerings to the town's most important spirit shrine at the base of the trees.

WAT MAI SUWANNAPHUMAHAM

ວັດໄຫມ່ສຸວັນນະພູມອາຮາມ

Inaugurated in 1821 (some sources claim 1797), **Wat Mai** (Map p136; Th Sisavangvong; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-5pm) succeeded Wat Aham as the residence of the Sangkharat until that position moved to Pha That Luang in Vientiane. The five-tiered roof of the wooden *sim* follows the standard Luang Prabang style, but the roofed front veranda, with its gables angled towards the sides of the chapel rather than towards the front, is an anomaly. This unusual plan may have been influenced by local vernacular architecture, as exemplified in the old wooden house just across the street from Wat Mai. The front veranda is also remarkable for its decorated columns and the sumptuous gold relief walls that recount the tale of Vessantara (Pha Wet in Lao), the Buddha's penultimate birth, as well as scenes from the Ramayana and village life.

Behind the main *sim* stands an open-sided shelter housing two long racing boats. These slender, graceful craft are brought out during Bun Pi Mai Lao (Lao New Year) in April and again in October during Bun Nam (Water Festival). Heavily decorated with flower garlands, each boat will hold up to 50 rowers, plus a coxswain.

Wat Mai was spared destruction by the Chinese Haw, who reportedly found the *sim*

too beautiful to harm. Most of the other 20 or so buildings are newer.

The Pha Bang, which is normally housed in the Royal Palace Museum, is brought here and put on public display in a temporary pavilion in front of the *sim* at Wat Mai during the Bun Pi Mai Lao celebrations.

WAT THAT LUANG

ວັດທາດຫລວງ

Legend has it that **Wat That Luang** (Map p136; Th Phu Vao) was originally established by Ashokan missionaries from India in the 3rd century BC. However, there is no evidence whatsoever to confirm this, and the current *sim* was built in 1818 under the reign of King Manthaturat. The ashes of King Sisavang Vong and his brother are interred inside the large central stupa, which was erected in 1910. A smaller *thaat* (stupa) in front of the *sim* dates back to 1820. Inside the huge *sim* are a few Luang Prabang Buddha images and other artefacts.

WAT MANOLOM

ວັດມະໂນລົມ

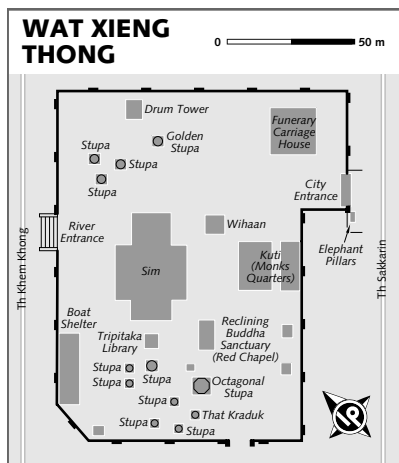
Although its outer appearance isn't very impressive, **Wat Manolom** (Wat Mano; Map p136; Th Pha Mahapatsaman) stands just outside the barely visible city walls and occupies possibly the oldest temple site in Luang Prabang. City annals say it was founded in 1375 on the site of a smaller temple established by King Fa Ngum. The decaying *sim* held the Pha Bang from 1502 to 1513 and still contains a sitting bronze Buddha cast in 1372. This image is about 6m high and weighs an estimated two tonnes – some parts of the bronze are 15mm thick. An important city talisman, the image would probably be moved to another temple if anyone could figure out how!

The Buddha's arms reportedly came off during a battle between French and Thai armies in the late 19th century. After the battle the colonialists allegedly made off with most of the appendages, except for a portion of one forearm, now placed beside one of the feet. The Lao later reconstructed the missing arms with cement. Near the *sim* are the scant remains of an older temple, **Wat Xieng Kang** (Map p136), allegedly constructed in 1363.

PHU SI

ພູສີ

The temples on the upper slopes of 100m-high **Phu Si** (Map p136 & p138; Th Sisavangvong; admission US\$1;



A TRAVELLER'S TALE *Katie Horner*

Wandering Luang Prabang's cracked pavements, sweat making me resemble a fried tomato, I spy a wat, not unusual in itself. I look it up in my trusty guide book and find it is Wat Manolom. It looks rather shabby from the outside, but upon approaching it and pausing in the shade of the entrance I am greeted with a hearty *sabqi-dii* from a couple of friendly monks leaving. Intrigued by this open welcome I ask if it's OK to wander around? Yes they nod in unison, and usher me in.

As I enter the grounds and turn a corner of one of the buildings, a youngish monk of 12 or 13 calls to me in Lao. I indicate I can't understand him and in excellent English he asks if I can speak Lao. I bashfully reel out a few words I have picked up and he smiles encouragingly. He asks where I am from and when I tell him Australia, I get another grin and the word 'kangaroo'. He has a book in his hand and explains that he is studying.

'On the weekend?' I inquire with raised eyebrows. He nods somewhat reluctantly and explains he has to study on the weekends because he has to go to school the other days. He needs a holiday, he states without a hint of irony.

I ask if it's OK to join him in the shade. We chat about where I have been and at the mention of Nong Khiaw he points to his chest, swathed in orange, and says that's where he's from! 'It's a beautiful place' I say and he tells me that his parents come down to visit him sometimes. I ask if I can see the book he is studying from. Not only is he very good at speaking English but, it seems, quite proficient at writing it as well. I am impressed and tell him so.

However, I don't want to keep him (well, I do, but he may get into trouble and I am boiling hot) so I walk around the wat, with more *sabqi-diis* from the young monk and his friends following me out. What a refreshing end to my visit to Luang Prabang. If only I had asked him his name.

(8am-6pm) were recently constructed, but it is likely there were once other temples located on this important hill site. There is an excellent view of town from the top of the hill.

On the lower slopes of the hill are two of the oldest (and now abandoned) temples in Luang Prabang. The decaying *sim* at **Wat Pa Huak** (Map p136) – on the lower northern slope near the Royal Palace Museum – has a splendid carved wood and mosaic façade showing Buddha riding Airavata, the three-headed elephant of Hindu mythology (in which he is usually depicted as Lord Indra's mount). The gilded and carved front doors are often locked, but during the day there's usually an attendant nearby who will open the doors for a tip of a couple of hundred kip. Inside, the original 19th-century murals have excellent colour, considering the lack of any restoration. The murals show historic scenes along the Mekong River, including visits by Chinese diplomats and warriors arriving by river and horse caravans. Three large seated Buddhas and several smaller standing and seated images date from the same time as the murals or possibly earlier.

Around on the northeastern flank of the hill are the ruins of **Wat Pha Phutthabaht** (Map p138), originally constructed in 1395 during the reign of Phaya Samsenthai on the site of

a 'Buddha footprint'. The ruins are of mixed style but are said to show a definite Lanna or Chiang Mai influence, as well as some later Vietnamese augmentation.

The fee to climb to the summit of the hill is collected at the northern entrance near Wat Pa Huak (you don't have to pay the fee to reach Wat Pa Huak, however).

The 24m-high **That Chomsi** (Map p136), erected in 1804 and restored in 1914, stands at the summit, clearly visible from most ground-level points in the city. This stupa is the starting point for a colourful Lao New Year procession in mid-April. If you continue over the summit and start down the path on the other side, you'll come to a small **cave shrine** (Map p136; sometimes called Wat Tham Phu Si, although without monks it's not officially a wat). Plopped down in the middle of the cave is a large, fat Buddha image – called Pha Kasai in Lao – and a sheltered area for worshippers. On a nearby crest is a Russian anti-aircraft cannon that children use as a makeshift merry-go-round.

WAT XIENG MUAN

ວັດຂຽງມຸ່ວນ

The *sim* at **Wat Xieng Muan** (Map p138) dates back to 1879, though no doubt the monastery

site is much older. The sculpture inside is better than average and the ceiling is painted with gold *naga*, an uncommon motif in this position – possibly a Thai Lū influence. Also notable is the elaborate *háang thien* (candle rail) with *naga* at either end.

With backing from Unesco and New Zealand, Wat Xieng Muan has restored the monks' quarters as a classroom to train young monks in the artistic skills needed to maintain and preserve Luang Prabang's temples. Among these skills are woodcarving, painting and Buddha-casting, all of which came to a virtual halt after 1975. If you step into the grounds of Wat Xieng Muan during the day you'll see the monastic residents learning or teaching these arts.

OTHER TEMPLES

In the northeastern corner of town near the meeting of the Nam Khan and the Mekong River is a string of historic, still active temples. Facing Th Sakkarin is **Wat Sensoukaram** (Map p138), a Thai-style wat built in 1718 and restored in 1932 and 1957. The name reportedly refers to its founding on an initial 100,000 kip donation. It has one of the most dazzling façades of all of Luang Prabang's temples; rich ruby red with intricate gold overlay. Behind Villa Santi near the river road, the simple **Wat Nong Sikhunmeuang** (Map p138) was built in 1729, burned in 1774 and rebuilt in 1804.

Southwest of Villa Santi and set back off the street is **Wat Pa Phai** (Map p138), whose classic Tai-Lao fresco over the gilded and carved wooden façade is at least 100 years old; the picture depicts scenes from everyday Lao life from the era in which it was painted.

Wat Pha Mahathat (Wat That; Map p136), the third wat southwest of the Phousi Hotel, is named for a venerable Lanna-style *thâat* erected in 1548. The *sim* in front, built in 1910, is quite ornate, with carved wooden windows and portico, rosette-gilded pillars, exterior Jataka (stories of the Buddha's past lives) reliefs and a roof in the Luang Prabang style lined with temple bells. The massive *naga* along the steps, also Lanna in style, resemble those at Wat Phra That Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

An easy 3km walk or bicycle ride north-east of town is **Wat Pa Phon Phao**, a forest meditation wat famous for the teachings of the late abbot, Ajahn Saisamut. Saisamut's funeral in 1992 was the largest and most well attended

monk's funeral Laos had seen in decades. The monastery's **Phra That Khong Santi Chedi** (Peace Pagoda; donation expected; ☎ 8-10am & 2-4pm Mon-Fri), built in 1988, has become a favourite Lao tourist attraction. This large yellow stupa contains three floors inside and an outside terrace near the top with a view of the surrounding plains. The inside walls are painted with all manner of Buddhist stories and moral admonitions.

On the Mekong River near the north-western end of Th Phu Vao is a modern Vietnamese-Lao temple, **Wat Pha Baht Tai** (Map p136). The temple itself is rather garish but behind the temple is a shady terrace overlooking the Mekong; on a hot afternoon this is a good place to cool off and watch the sunset.

Almost next door to Wat Xieng Muan, **Wat Choumkhong** (Map p138) is a small but very pretty temple with one of the loveliest gardens in town. In November and December it's awash with colour courtesy of poinsettia trees.

ACROSS THE MEKONG RIVER

Across from central Luang Prabang there are several notable temples in Ban Xieng Maen. Ban Xieng Maen itself played an important role as the terminus of the historic road between Luang Prabang and various northern Thai kingdoms, eg Nan and Phayao.

Wat Long Khun (admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-5pm), almost directly across the Mekong River from Wat Xieng Thong, is the best place to disembark by boat for Xieng Maen explorations if you're chartering a boat. This wat features a nicely decorated portico, vintage 1937, plus older sections from the 18th century and a few fading Jataka murals. When the coronation of a Luang Prabang king was pending, it was customary for him to spend three days in retreat at Wat Long Khun before ascending the throne. A restoration project, completed in 1995 by the Department of Museums and Archaeology, with the assistance of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, has brought new life and beauty to the monastery buildings.

Founded in 1889 and since abandoned, **Wat Tham Xieng Maen** (admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-5pm) is in a 100m-deep limestone cave called Tham Sakkarin Savannakuha, a little northwest of Wat Long Khun. Many Buddha images from temples that have been torched or otherwise fallen into decay are kept here; during Bun Pi Mai Lao many local worshippers come to Wat Tham to pay homage and cleanse the images.

The large stone-block entrance built around the mouth of the cave displays good relief work on stair pedestals, and is flanked by two large ruined spirit houses and a couple of plumeria (frangipani) trees. An iron gate across the cave mouth is usually locked; inquire at Wat Long Khun and someone will come and unlock the gate and guide you through the cave. It's very long and dark, and parts of the cave floor are slippery, so it's a good idea to go with a guide; bring a torch (flashlight). There are several other caves nearby that are easily found and explored with local help, although none are quite as extensive as Tham Sakkarin Savannakhu.

At the top of a hill above Wat Long Khun and Wat Tham is peaceful **Wat Chom Phet** (Map p136; admission US\$0.50), built by the Thai army in 1888 and offering an undisturbed view of the town and river. A small *thâat* here contains the bones of Chao Thong Di (wife of King Sakkarin), who died in 1929.

Southwest of Wat Chom Phet in the village of Xieng Maen, **Wat Xieng Maen** (Map p136) was founded in 1592 by Chao Naw Kaewkumman, son of Setthathirat, but it fell into ruin and had to be rebuilt in 1927. The newer *sîm* contains a few artefacts dating from the original temple, including the original doors. This spot is especially sacred to Xieng Maen residents because it once housed the Pha Bang for seven days and seven nights on its way back to Luang Prabang in 1867 following a lengthy stay in Vientiane.

GOODWILL ACTIVITIES

Get in touch with the local community by making the most of some commendable enterprises in Luang Prabang. Pop into **Big Brother Mouse** (Map p138; ☎ 5377486; www.laobooks.com; Ban Xieng Mouane; ☎ 9am-6pm) and pick up some books to distribute to local children. Books cost 15,000 kip each and the idea behind the programme is to encourage visitors to hand out something more beneficial than candy, while promoting literacy. Run by a retired American publisher, the staff is made up of Laotian college and high-school students, all of whom contribute to the content, illustrations, and admin of the office. You can also purchase books at the night market or make a donation to support the production of new material, and the office gladly accepts volunteers when the need arises.

Rather than trashing your used water bottles, cans and other recyclable waste, donate it to the **Children's Cultural Centre** (Map p136; Th Kitsarat; ☎ 9am-3pm), which on-sells the waste to other dealers and uses the funds to provide after-school activities for kids.

If you've bought up big at the night markets and need to lighten your pack, you can donate used, washed clothing to the **Lao Red Cross** (Map p136; ☎ 252856; Th Wisunarat). You can also donate money, and, if you're feeling particularly perky, you can even donate blood; a precious commodity in Laos.

Ban Xieng Maen itself is worth a wander since, like Luang Prabang, it's maintained its original urban plan, possibly dating back to the 14th century. Unlike Luang Prabang though, most of the main roads (paralleling the river) and byways (leading to the river) haven't been paved over, so the plan is technically more intact.

Getting There & Away

You can charter boats from Luang Prabang's charter boat pier to Wat Long Khun or Ban Xieng Maen for US\$3 return, or you can wait for the infrequent ferry boats at the ferry boat pier further south, which charge around US\$0.25 per passenger.

HERITAGE HOUSE

ເຮືອນພິລິນ

A Unesco-sponsored exhibit and information centre called **Heritage House** (La Maison de Patrimoine; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) occupies an old wooden Lao house on teak pillars in Ban Xieng Muan. Other than the very impressive wood and *colombage* (bamboo lattice daubed with natural mortar) house itself, there is little to take in here. Occasional weaving demonstrations are held in the house.

Activities

CYCLING

Luang Prabang is far bigger than the inner grid many people stick to and exploring the surrounding bans and wats on a bicycle is a beautiful way to enjoy the city. Bikes can

be rented from guesthouses, tour companies and shops around Th Sisavangvong for US\$1 to US\$3 per day depending on the state and style of the bike. The old quarter can be easily covered in half a day, taking in temples and other sights. It doesn't take much effort to get out of town either: head south past Talat Phousy (Phousy Market) and into the hills, but watch out for punctures on rocky roads.

MASSAGE & SAUNA

Luang Prabang is one of the best places in Southeast Asia to indulge in a herbal sauna or Swedish, Lao or Khamu massage. Prices are generally 30,000 kip for an hour-long body or foot massage, 40,000 kip for an oil massage, and 10,000 kip for a sauna. Options are abundant, but the following are recommended based on the tireless and selfless research by the author:

Aroma Spa (☎ 020-761 1255; Th Sisavangvong;

☎ 10am-10pm) Facials, body scrubs and indulgent combination packages ranging from US\$30 to US\$50.

Khamu Spa (Map p138; ☎ 212092; Th Sakkarin;

☎ 10am-10pm) Excellent traditional Lao and Khamu massages.

Lao Red Cross (Map p136; ☎ 252856; Th Wisunarat;

☎ massage 9am-9pm, sauna 5-9pm) Housed in a nicely preserved Lao-French building with half-timbered walls. Proceeds go towards the Lao Red Cross so really any visit here is an act of pure selflessness. Take your own towel or sarong.

Phousi Massage (Map p136; Th Sisavangvong;

☎ 10am-10pm) Friendly and attentive.

Spa Garden (Map p136; ☎ 212325) In a quiet pocket near Wat Nong Sikhunmeuang, this spot offers the same indulgent treatments as Aroma (above).

View Massage (Map p138; ☎ 212271; Th Khem Khong;

☎ 10am-11pm) Tranquil setting and particularly good oil massages.

Courses

COOKING

Tamarind (Map p138; ☎ 020-7770484; www.tamarind.laos.com; Ban Wat Nong) Excellent cooking classes for truly authentic Laotian food, including market tours for fresh ingredients, jungle picnics where you can actually catch your own fish, and more.

Tammak Lao Three Elephant Cafe (Map p138; ☎ 252525; www.laocookingcourse.com; Th Sakkarin; per person US\$25) Full-day cooking classes including market shopping and a Lao lunch and dinner.

Tum Tum Cheng Restaurant (Map p136; ☎ 253224; tumtumcheng@yahoo.com; 29/2 Th Sakkarin; 1/2/3 days

per person US\$25/45/60) Well-regarded classes including market shopping and drinks.

WEAVING

OckPopTok (Map p138; ☎ 212597; www.ockpoptok.com; classes per half/full day US\$30/40) has a weaving and cultural centre where you can witness the silk- and cotton- weaving process from scratch. The skill and patience required to master these looms is quite remarkable and the 15 weavers here are true masters. Fortunately you can try your own hand at the art by taking a small-group class in dyeing and weaving. A Lao lunch is included and you take home your handiwork. Make bookings at its gallery.

Walking Tour

WALK FACTS

This walk starts in the heart of town, near the western bank of the Mekong, loops around the highlights of the central area, and ends in the main strip of Th Sisavangvong. The entire walk is about 3.5km and will take four to six hours, depending on how long you stop at some of the sights.

Start your walking tour with a visit to **Big Brother Mouse** (1; opposite), just off Th Sisavangvong, where you can purchase books to distribute to kids during your exploration. Heading south along this back street you'll come across **Wat Xieng Muan** (2; p144), home to an arts' school for monks. Almost next door is petite **Wat Choumkhong** (3; p145) with its exquisite garden. If you continue south along this back street you'll hit a T-junction and the northeastern wall of the **Royal Palace Museum** (4; p139). Turn left and then right onto Th Sisavangvong to access the front gates. Potter here for an hour or so and then continue south along Th Sisavangvong, turning right at the Palace's southwestern wall. **Wat Mai Suwannaphumaham** (5; p143), noted for its exterior gilded relief, will be on your left. If you follow this street towards the Mekong, you'll stumble across some gorgeous **Lao-French colonial houses** (6) and the first left will land you in the colourful **fresh produce market** (7; p155). Walk the length of the market and turn right onto Th Kitsarat so you can hit the waterfront.

Follow Th Khem Khong north. This stretch provides a good range of Luang Prabang's architectural diversity, including beautifully preserved colonial villas, traditional Lao abodes and shop fronts, old and new.

Finish your river walk at **Wat Xieng Thong** (8; p141), where you'll need to stop for an hour or so. Exit the temple grounds at Th Sakkarin, and head right, past **Wat Si Bun Heuang** (9), **Wat Sirimungkhun** (10), **Wat Sop** (11), and **Wat Sensoukarahm** (12; p145). Turn right where Auberge les 3 Nagas sits regally on the corner and then left at the next T-junction. Just around the corner is **Tamarind** (13; p153), the perfect spot for a refreshing cooler, or even better, lunch.

After your pit stop make your way to Th Sisavang Vatthana and head left until you hit the eastern bank of Luang Prabang's peninsula. Some stairs leading down to the water on the opposite side of the road provide a good vantage point for photos. Walk south along Th Kingkitsarat and turn right at Th Wisunarat, so you can gander at **Wat Wisunarat** (14; p142), one of the city's oldest temples. At the eastern end of the temple's

compound is the bulbous That Makmo – the Watermelon Stupa.

Continue southwest along Th Wisunarat and take your next main right, onto Th Kit-sarat. A block up you'll find the **Children's Cultural Centre** (15; p146), where you can discard any empty water bottles for a good cause.

Turning right onto Th Sisavangvong you'll find yourself back on the main drag, and ultimately at steps to **Phu Si** (16; p143). The ascent is worthwhile – sunset vistas from the western side of the hill next to the 19th-century **That Chomsi** (17; p143) can be superb, except in the late dry season when even the sun's intensity is strongly muted.

If you've got the energy and your timing's right you can top the day off with a wander through the ambient **Handicraft night market** (18; p155).

Tours

Luang Prabang has an abundance of travel agents vying for your patronage for half- to multiday tours. Tours to the waterfalls and the Pak Ou Caves (p158) are particularly popular. Many also book domestic and international flights. Tour prices are competitive but it still pays to shop around. Most operators line Th Sisavangvong, but the following are recommended for good trekking, rafting and cycling excursions:

Action Max Laos (Map p136; ☎ 252417; actionmaxasia@yahoo.fr; Ounheuan & Th Khem Khong) Elephant treks and comfortable, small group tours to surrounding area. Prices around US\$30 per person per day.

Asian Oasis (Map p138; ☎ 252553; fax 252304; www.asian-oasis.com; Ban Vat Sene) Operates the luxury *Luang Say* boat from Luang Prabang to Huay Xau, three days weekly in each direction (two weekly May to September). See also p218.

Green Discovery (Map p138; ☎ 212093; www.green-discoverylaos.com; Th Sisavangvong) Kayaking, trekking, mountain biking, motorcycling and multiday trips north including motorcycle tours.

Lao Youth Travel (Map p136; ☎ 253340; www.laoyouthtravel.com; 72 Th Sisavangvong) Highly recommended for its focus on community-based ecotourism. One- and two-day tours between Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang, and rewarding multiday trips to minority villages in the far north. Prices around US\$35 to US\$50 per day, all inclusive.

Tiger Trails (Map p138; ☎ 252655; www.laos-adventures.com; Th Sisavangvong) Single- and multi-day trips involving trekking, rafting and cycling around Luang Prabang. Longer trips to Muang Ngoi or Muang Khua and

accommodation homestays. Tiger Trails also has an elephant camp about 15km outside of Luang Prabang on the banks of the Nam Khan, where it offers elephant treks and mahout (elephant trainer) courses. This company places a strong emphasis on conservation and community support. Prices range from US\$29 to US\$40 per day.

Treasure Travel Laos (Map p138; ☎ 254403; www.treasureTravelLaos.com; Sisavangvong Rd) Organised and customised tours throughout Laos. Prices depend on duration and group size.

Festivals & Events

The two most important annual events in Luang Prabang are **Bun Pi Mai Lao** (Lao New Year) in April (see Bun Pi Mai Lao, p141) and the **boat races** during Bun Awk Phansa (the End of the Rains Retreat) in October. Both events draw large numbers of both Lao and foreigners to the city, so be sure to book a room in advance if you're coming to town then.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Near the Mekong

The old silversmithing district near the Mekong, a neighbourhood known as Ban Wat That (named for nearby Wat Pha Mahathat, or 'Wat That' for short), and the adjacent Ban Ho Xiang, have become a centre for a cluster of modest guesthouses.

Oudomphone Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 252419; s/d US\$5/6, shared bathroom US\$4/5) Spick-and-span rooms with spring mattresses, fans and small windows greet the weary traveller at this homely guesthouse. Hidden in a residential block, it's perfect for those looking to escape the tourist glut for a quiet night's sleep.

Pakam Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 253436; Ban Pakam; s/d US\$8/10) Tucked away in a pretty, provincial side street, this small guesthouse has modest rooms with dark wood furnishings, wall fans, comfortable beds, writing desks and never-fail hot water in the gleaming bathrooms. There is only a handful of rooms so the young and friendly staff (who will happily practise their French and Lao with you) will treat you like a member of the family early on. Upstairs there is a small balcony with lovely residential views.

Vanvisa Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 212925; vandara1@hotmail.com; 42/2 Ban Wat That; s/d US\$8/15) Vanvisa Guest House features six rooms at the back of a shop that sells textiles, antiques and handicrafts. The owner, a cultured Lao lady, sometimes makes breakfasts and family-style

dinners for guests and can even arrange an informal cooking workshop.

Historic Temple District

On and off Th Sisavangvong/Th Sakkarin is the most concentrated area of colonial architecture and historic monasteries. It's scenic and central.

Choumkhong Guest House (Map p138; ☎ 252690; Ban Xieng Mouane; r US\$5) Just across the road from Wat Choumkhong, this friendly guesthouse has small alabaster rooms with good beds, tiled floors, crisp linen and ceiling fans. The bathrooms are shared but they're the cleanest in town.

Sackarin Guest House (Map p138; ☎ 254512; off Th Sisavangvong; r \$15; ☎) Signposted from the main street, this solid guesthouse has a handful of slightly clinical, but clean and spacious rooms with satellite TV and good bathrooms. We like the koala motif rugs and comfy beds. It's excellent value, but can be noisy.

Also available:

Mala Guest House (Map p138; ☎ 212800; Ban Xieng Mouane; r \$5) Basic, friendly and good value.

Thatsaphone Guest House (Map p138; ☎ 020-5671888; Ban Xieng Mouane; r \$8-10) Gorgeous location with airy rooms.

Elsewhere

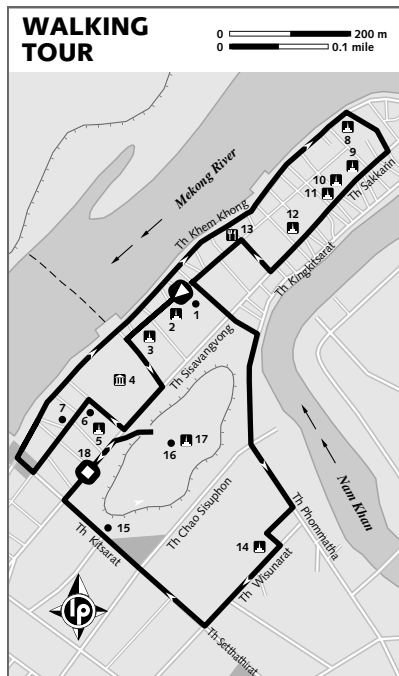
Koun Savan Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 212297; off Th Kitsarat; r shared bathroom US\$4-6, with bath US\$12; ☎) This guesthouse sits in a quiet street and is spread around a lush, colourful garden. Tight and simple rooms have outside bathrooms, and slightly larger and more expensive rooms have nicer shared amenities. The doubles with air-con and private bathrooms are spotless, and the owners are lovely.

Maniphone Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 212636; Th Phu Vao; r \$15; ☎) This personable, single-storey guesthouse is set back from the main road, providing a decent buffer of space from the traffic. The compact rooms have pristine linen, small TVs, minibars, wardrobes and clean bathrooms. It's one of the friendliest spots in town.

Th Pha Mahapatsaman

This area is quieter and less inspiring than other pockets of town, but you'll find good-value accommodation here as a result.

Thavisouk Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 252022; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; r US\$4; ☎) The friendly Thavisouk features fatter-than-usual mattresses in



clean, sunny rooms with fans and blue-tiled bathrooms. Owners are warm and laid-back and the entrance houses an internet cafe and a fridge full of Beerlao.

Thony II Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 254779; off Th Wisunarat; r \$5) A far cry from your average budget bunker options, Thony II has airy, unadorned rooms with attached bathrooms, fans and crisp linen. Owners are young and helpful and there's a common TV room out the front.

Jaliya Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 252154; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; r US\$6-12; 🏠) The ever-popular Jaliya has a range of rooms including spartan, fan-cooled versions with shared bathroom, all the way up to those with cable TV and air-con. All are appealing and well priced. Motorbikes and bicycles are available for hire.

MIDRANGE

Historic Temple District

Ammata Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 212175; phetmany@yahoo.com.au; Ban Wat Nong; r \$15; 🏠) One of the best deals in town, this small, popular guesthouse has a low-key ambience, spotless and spacious rooms with polished wood interiors, and renovated bathrooms. It's mid-range quality at small-pocket prices. Most rooms are upstairs, running off a shared and shaded balcony.

Villa Sokxai (Map p138; ☎ 254309; sokxaigh@yahoo.com; Th Sakkarin; r US\$25; 🏠) A reliable midrange option in a pleasant pocket with cool and spotless rooms and cable TV. The friendly owners speak a little English and although rooms are small, they're very comfortable.

Sayo Guest House (Map p138; ☎ 252614; http://sayoguesthouse.free.fr/cms; Ban Xieng Mouane; r US\$25-50, f US\$50-60; 🏠) The Sayo is a popular fixture on midrange itineraries and for good reason. Set in a French colonial mansion, it offers rooms with high ceilings, louvred windows, four-poster beds, TVs and lovely tiled bathrooms. Upstairs two capacious family rooms come with a mezzanine level for kids or itinerant spouses and sizable bathrooms with tubs. Out the back are the less-expensive former servants' quarters.

Xieng Mouane Guest House (Map p138; ☎/fax 252152; 86/6 Ban Xieng Mouane; r/f US\$30/40; 🏠) The rooms in this white two-storey colonial house are snug, but stylish. Muted colours, quilted beds, low lighting and high ceilings are matched by ample bathrooms. Many are set in a quadrangle around a flourishing

garden at the back, and family rooms have a connecting twin.

Sayo River Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 212484; http://sayoguesthouse.free.fr/cms; Th Khem Khong; r incl breakfast US\$30-50; 🏠) This new and stylish sibling of the longstanding Sayo has sizeable rooms, all tastefully decorated with contemporary Lao wooden furniture and woven bedspreads. The cheapest rooms are ground floor with compact bathrooms; pricier versions have glossy bathrooms with tubs and/or balconies with lovely river views.

Ancient Luang Prabang Hotel (Map p136; ☎ 212264; www.ancientluangprabang.com; Th Sisavangvong; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$40/45/50; 🏠) Push past the Ancient Luang Prabang's grandiose entrance and you'll be rewarded with boutique-style studio rooms. Features including cable TV and minibars play an aesthetic second to polished teak, local handicrafts and divine timber-clad bathrooms. Some rooms also have street views, but triples are a tight squeeze.

Also available:

Saynamkhan Hotel (Map p138; ☎ 212976; saynamkhane-lp@hotmail.com; Th Kingkitsarat; r US\$20-35; 🏠) Two-storey colonial building with rustic rooms and river views.

Ban Pack Luck (Map p138; ☎ 253373, 020-5516517; packluck@hotmail.com; Ban Wat Nong; r \$30-35; 🏠) Intimate villa with small but classy rooms.

Near the Mekong

Kongsavath Guest House (Map p138; ☎ 212994; khongsavath@hotmail.com; Th Khem Khong; r/ste US\$20/30; 🏠) Perched on the northern bank of the Mekong, Kongsavath is a cosy, homely guesthouse with quality rooms. All have large beds, Lao lamps, gleaming bathrooms and shuttered windows. Suites are considerably larger than the standard rooms.

Merry Lao Swiss Hotel (Map p136; ☎ 260211; www.freewebs.com/merrylao_swiss; Th Kingkitsarat; r US\$30-50, f US\$80; 🏠) Wide, low-slung beds, silk textiles, splashes of polished teak, couches, satellite TV and generous bathrooms are standards at this very comfortable hotel. The pricier rooms are upstairs and are larger, and one interconnecting room up top suits families.

Elsewhere

Villa Suan Maak (Map p136; ☎ 252775; www.villa-suan-maak-laos.com; Th Noradet; r incl breakfast \$20-35; 🏠) Formerly known as Noixdarec, this gorgeous villa is set behind a handsome garden. The house itself is beautifully maintained and

contains sweet rooms with local handicrafts, spreads and cushions. Owners are endearing and breakfast is served alfresco.

Lane Xang Guest House (Map p136; ☎ 212794; villalanexang@yahoo.com; Th Wisunarat; r incl breakfast US\$26-40; 🏠) This supremely tasteful villa has just seven capacious and cool rooms with lofty ceilings, hand-woven textiles and oversized tubs. It's a wonderfully sophisticated blend of colonial and traditional Lao beauty and highly recommended.

Villa Kiengkham (Map p136; ☎/fax 212219; Th Wisunarat; r \$25; 🏠) The ideal spot for fussy folk who don't want to break the bank. This quiet hotel has high ceilings, timber flourishes and clinically clean rooms with satellite TV. Breakfast (not included) is served on a serene patio overlooking a pond.

Le Parasol Blanc Hotel (Map p136; ☎ 252124; www.hotelinlaos-vicogroup.com; Th Phu Vao; r incl breakfast from US\$55; 🏠) This quaint little hotel overlooks a small man-made pond in a tranquil setting. Generous rooms have polished floorboards, large TVs and private balconies with leafy green views. There's a free shuttle to town or the airport.

Also recommended:

Sanako Hotel (Map p136; ☎ 252992; sanakoehotel@yahoo.com; Th Phu Vao; r US\$35-70; 🏠) Kitschy hotel with good facilities capturing the Chinese tour bus market.

Manoluck Hotel (Map p136; ☎ 212250; manoluck@laotel.com; 121/3 Th Phu Vao; r incl breakfast US\$45; 🏠) Comfy, clean and snug if a little charmless.

TOP END

Historic Temple District

Apsara (Map p138; ☎ 212420; www.theapsara.com; Th Kingkitsarat; r incl breakfast US\$55-85; 🏠) Commonly tagged Luang Prabang's most chic hotel, the Apsara fills its rooms with contemporary Asian décor in bold and vivacious colours. The cheaper standard rooms are much more minimalist than the opulent superior rooms, but all have huge beds and excellent facilities.

Sala Prabang (Map p138; ☎ 252460; http://salaprabang.salalao.com; 102/6 Th Khem Khong; r incl breakfast US\$60-75; 🏠) This artistically refurbished, century-old mansion facing the river is joined by a newer wing a few doors up, built in similar style, all painted in earth tones. Boutique and beautiful, rooms come with flowers on the pillows, tiled interiors, gracious French doors and plush sheets and towels. Service is exceptional.

Auberge les 3 Nagas (Map p138; ☎ 253888; www.3nagas.com; Th Sakkarin; r US\$105, ste US\$140-180; 🏠) Straddling both sides of Th Sakkarin in two gloriously restored villas, this hotel has boutique rooms in discrete east-meets-west panache. Cool interiors swim in teak scents, silk spreads adorn the king-size beds, and chrome fittings bounce of the polished wood bathrooms. All the suites have private courtyards or balconies. Internet access is available if you have your own laptop.

Villa Santi (Map p138; ☎ 252157; www.villasantiho.tel.com; Th Sakkarin; s/d/ste US\$150/170/250; 🏠) This 120-year-old residence was once home to King Sisavang Vong's wife. Steeped in history and classic French-Lao architecture, the rooms feature Lao art, antiques and mod cons. There is a herbal sauna and traditional massage on site.

Auberge Le Calao (Map p136; ☎ 212100; www.calao.inn.laopdr.com; Th Khem Khong; s/d incl breakfast US\$65/70; 🏠) Hopeless romantics will adore this vintage Sino-Portuguese-style mansion facing the Mekong. The five capacious and delicate rooms have tiled floors, private balconies with river views, crisp, white embroidered linen and positively regal bathrooms.

Ban Wat That

Satri House (Map p136; ☎ 253491; www.satrihouse.com; 057 Th Phothisarat; r incl breakfast US\$100; 🏠) Built at the turn of the last century as a royal villa, the seven rooms here are furnished with Southeast Asian antiques. The décor is colourful and unique and tubs in the bathrooms sit beneath louvred windows. In the private garden timber sun lounges surround the swimming pool.

Maison Souvannaphoum (Map p136; ☎ 212200; www.coloursfangsana.com; Th Phothisarat; r US\$200-400; 🏠) Once the official residence of Prince Souvanna Phouma (suite 214 was his bedroom), the glorious Souvannaphoum is now part of the Thailand-based Angsana Resorts Hotel group. The aromatherapy-scented rooms are opulent but subtle, with elegant stone-floored showers, huge beds and couches. There is an open-air restaurant and spa on site, and the service is flawless.

Eating

BAKERIES

Strong Lao coffee and sweet European pastries tempt foreign visitors at several bakeries along Th Sisavangvong and Th Chao Fa

Ngum. The pastry selection is generally better during the high season when consumption is at its peak, and supplies are fresh.

Scandinavian Bakery (Map p138; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$0.80-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A *falang-fave*, this branch of the Vientiane bakery serves delicious cakes, pastries and cookies, as well as large breakfasts and fabulous baguettes. It's small and pricey but you can enjoy air-con and yesterday's *Bangkok Times* with your meal.

JoMa Bakery Café (Map p136; ☎ 252292; Th Chao Fa Ngum; meals US\$1-2; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Arguably the best bakery in town, JoMa has alfresco tables along the street or in a spacious air-con dining room. A great menu of sandwiches, soups and salads joins the large bread and pastry selection, and the coffee is excellent.

CT Bakery Restaurant (Map p138; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$1-3; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Although it lacks a decadent array of chocolate treats and pastries, this bakery serves outstanding 'breakfast baguettes' stuffed with delicious meats and cheeses. It also has an extensive Thai, Lao and European menu at reasonable prices and a secondhand bookshop.

CAFÉS

Phousi Cafe & Gallery (Map p138; Th Kingkitsarat; meals US\$2-2.50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) In a leafy bamboo courtyard, this quiet café serves set Western breakfasts, salads, sandwiches and a host of quasi-Lao and Thai stir-fries. It's deliberately tranquil with bubbling water features, stylish timber slab tables, and local art on the walls.

Morning Glory Café (Map p138; ☎ 020-7774122; Th Sakkarin; meals US\$2-3.50; ☺ breakfast & lunch, closed Tue) This smart and cosy café dishes up some of the tastiest breakfasts in town: smoked ham omelettes, fresh muesli, rice soup, and fabulous coffee. For lunch tuck into esto chicken pasta or a fragrant Thai curry. Comfy chairs sit on the pavement and jazz bubbles in the background.

Restaurant Luang Prabang Bakery (Map p138; ☎ 252499; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This swish restaurant treats timid palates to excellent burgers, pizzas, pastas, steaks and salads, and fairly generic 'Lao food'. The beautiful timber seating is worth a visit, as is the French and Australian wine, superb coffee and gluttony-inducing cakes.

Café des Artes (Map p138; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$3-10; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The scrummy

selection of deli goods on this menu satiates chorizo, salami, *saucisson*, pâté and cheese cravings. It also boasts French fare, soups, *tartines*, burgers, brochettes and set menus, plus some fusions like duck pizza.

Le Café Ban Vat Sene (Map p138; Th Sakkarin; meals US\$3.50-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) In a restored colonial building decorated with antiques, this fine café serves tapenades and tapas, smoked chicken and feta salads, and roast pork and tarragon-filled baguettes. The tarts and cakes are delicious. It's quietly chic, and the service is excellent.

EUROPEAN

Café Toui (Map p138; ☎ 253397; Th Sisavang Vatthana; meals US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This little cosmopolitan oasis serves delicious breakfast bagels and mostly European mains such as grilled buffalo with red wine and tomato sauce. The setting is terracotta and tasteful and the wine list is French.

Lala Café (Map p138; Th Kingkitsarat; meals US\$3.50-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A refreshing variation from the ubiquitous burger-and-pizza selection greets diners at this trendy little spot. Gracing the menu are Greek dishes, massaman curries and a kicking spicy catfish and mango salad. Dine in the intimate café or at the tables on the riverbank across the road.

Restaurant Brasserie L'Elephant (Map p138; ☎ 252482; Ban Wat Nong; meals US\$8-16; ☺ lunch & dinner) One of Luang Prabang's most elegant eateries features wooden floors, subdued lighting and Lao antiques. The menu is mostly French but you'll find other treats such as New Zealand rib eye with gorgonzola cheese sauce, and delectable seafood.

INDIAN

Nisha Restaurant (Map p138; Ban Xieng Mouane; meals US\$1-2; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Smaller than Nazim and tucked on a quieter street, this place serves Indian specialities, Western breakfasts and Lao dishes, both veg and nonveg.

Nazim Indian Food (Map p138; ☎ 253493; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$1.50-2.50; ☺ lunch & dinner) This vacuuous Indian diner has a huge menu of north and south Indian food. The curries come as spicy as you like and the vegetarian selection is extensive. The Indian deities and faux tandoori chickens adorning the walls are more appealing after several bottles of Kingfisher.

LAO, THAI & VIETNAMESE

Fruit Shake Restaurant (Map p138; ☎ 5672376; Th Sakkarin; meals US\$1; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The effort they didn't spend on the moniker has all gone into the fine Lao food at this local restaurant. Fried dried beef, Luang Prabang-style, fresh chilli pastes and wild deer with basil are up for grabs as well as three-course set menus for US\$3.

Paradise Restaurant (Map p136; ☎ 253200; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; meals US\$1.50-2; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This ambient spot resides in a quiet neck of the woods and serves great Lao and Luang Prabang specialties like sweet and sour Mekong squid, or *áw lám* – stewed meat with green beans and eggplant. Diners sit at picnic benches in a leafy courtyard.

Khemkhong View Restaurant (Map p138; Th Khem Khong; meals US\$1.50-2; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of the many riverside restaurants lining the Mekong, the split-level Khemkhong View has an extensive menu with choices such as spicy prawn and coconut soup, squid *láap* (salad; or intestine *láap* for the more adventurous) or steamed, fermented fish.

Naunenapha Restaurant (Map p138; ☎ 252998; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$2; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The no-nonsense Naunenapha has a pleasant tumble of tables edging onto the street and a wide variety of Thai, Lao and Western dishes. There are ample vegetarian options and the hot soupy curries are particularly delicious.

Mr Hong's Coffeshop & Restaurant (Map p136; 71/6 Ban Thongchaleun; meals US\$2-2.50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Mr Hong draws a steady clientele with his long menu of reasonably priced Lao dishes like *jeow* eggplant, and *láap pet* (duck salad). The cocktails are potent and the conversation easy.

Tamarind (Map p138; ☎ 020-7770484; www.tamarindlaos.com; Ban Wat Nong; meals US\$2.50-4; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Chic little Tamarind injects a great deal of style into the Luang Prabang dining scene, inventing its very own make of 'Mod-Lao' cuisine. The à la carte menu boasts delicious sampling platters with bamboo dip, stuffed lemongrass and *meuyang* – DIY parcels of noodles, herbs, fish and chilli pastes, and vegetables. With a day's notice they also serve banquets (per person US\$6 to US\$8) with variations like a Lao Celebration Feast (Pun Pa), and the degustation-style Adventurous Lao Gourmet. Dishes include whole fish, marinated in local herbs, stuffed with lemongrass and barbecued in banana leaves, traditional

eggplant and meat stew, or Lao-style barbecued pork. Meals are enhanced considerably by the owners' detailed explanation of the ingredients and how they're eaten. The fruit coolers are divine on a hot day and the *khai pene* (seaweed), chilli pastes and teas (which you can buy) are wholesaled to restaurants around the world.

View Kheam Kong Restaurant (Map p138; ☎ 212726; Th Khem Khong; meals US\$2.50-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Alongside *falang* fare and generic stir-fries, this riverside restaurant serves a good Luang Prabang sausage salad, fried green chilli with duck, and Luang Prabang-style stewed fish. Seating is on a large balcony with fairy lights.

Lao Lao Garden (Map p138; Th Kingkitsarat; meals US\$3-5; ☺ lunch & dinner) Superlative Thai, Lao and Western fare graces the long menu at this hip, alfresco restaurant, where tables tumble into a hilly, candlelit garden. The Lao barbecue here is a must – diners are served a basket of raw meat and vegetables, which they cook at their own leisure on a round hotplate in the centre of the table. It's about as much fun as dinner gets.

Tum Tum Cheng Restaurant (Map p136; ☎ 252019; Th Sakkarin; meals US\$3-5; ☺ lunch & dinner) Years of experience have made this one of the best restaurants in town, and the Lao chef here prepares an interesting menu of Lao and Lao-European fusion. As he lived in Hungary for some years, some of the dishes display a European touch.

Also recommended:

Visoun Restaurant (Map p136; ☎ 212268; Th Wisunarat; meals US\$2-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good selection of Lao and Chinese dishes.

Tum Tum Bamboo Restaurant (Map p138; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$2.50-4; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Authentic flavours in an ambient setting.

Tamnakk Lao Three Elephant Cafe (Map p138; ☎ 252525; Th Sakkarin; meals US\$2.50-6; ☺ lunch & dinner) Lao, Luang Prabang and Thai food.

LUANG PRABANG

Luang Prabang has a unique cuisine all its own. One of the local specialities is *jjew bawng*, a jamlike condiment made with chillies and dried buffalo skin. A soup called *áw lám*, made with dried meat, mushrooms, eggplant and a special bitter-spicy root, is also a typical Luang Prabang dish (roots and herbs with bitter-hot effects are a force in Luang Prabang cuisine). Other local delicacies include *phák nám*, a delicious watercress that's rarely found outside the Luang Prabang

area, and *khái pæn*, dried river moss fried in seasoned oil, topped with sesame seeds and served with *jàew bəwng*. *Khào kam*, a local red, sweet, slightly fizzy wine made from sticky rice, is abundantly and inexpensively available by the bottle in Luang Prabang. It can be good or bad depending on the brand.

Somchanh Restaurant (Map p136; ☎ 252021; Th Savannabanlang; meals US\$1-3; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple but pleasant outdoor place near the cluster of guesthouses in Ban Wat That serves a large selection of Lao and Luang Prabang dishes, including the best choice of vegetarian Lao food in town. Dining areas are divided between tables on a slight bluff near the kitchen and seating across the road on the riverbank.

QUICK EATS

You can get a huge chicken, mayo and salad baguette for around US\$1 from the baguette stalls (Map p136) at the corner of Th Sisavangvong and Th Kitsarat. There are also fruit stalls across the road.

Some of the cheapest and tastiest dishes in town can be found at the night stalls (Map p136) that emerge at dusk on streets running off Th Sisavangvong where the night market takes place. The main congregation is one street north of Th Kitsarat, where you can dine on a whole barbecued pig's head, superb vegetarian dishes and noodles, and just about everything in between. There's even a 'vegan' stall. All-you-can-fit bowls cost around US\$0.50.

SELF-CATERING

If you've got the will or facilities you can pick up fresh fruit, vegetables, meat (in more versions than you can imagine) and other goods at the Talat Phosy or the fresh produce market in Ban Pakam (see Markets, opposite).

Drinking

Most of Luang Prabang is sound asleep, or at least nodding off behind a bottle of *khào kam*, by 10pm, but there are a few bars around. Closing time, by law, is 11.30pm.

LPQ (Map p138; Th Kingkitsarat) Numerous name changes in recent years hasn't changed the sexual orientation of this chichi bar, which remains gay-friendly. A hint of the South Pacific permeates the interior and the atmosphere is subdued until the after-dinner

crowd creates a relaxed and happy buzz. Women and couples are welcome.

Hive Bar (Map p138; Th Kingkitsarat) This sultry den has a honeycomb of brick-lined, candlelit rooms and corridors, plus a cluster of alfresco tables out the front. The debaucherous mood is offset a tad by the blaring soundtrack, which travels from old-school Pixies to Thai pop. *Lào-lào* (rice whiskey) cocktails are the house specialty.

Lemongrass (Map p138; Th Khem Khong) This sleek and sophisticated bar serves classic cocktails and good wine in a chic setting. Unfortunately it's mostly for the benefit of gay travellers (women might find they are presented with this fact in hushed tones if they attempt to enter).

Martin's Pub (Map p136; Th Vatmou-Enna) This relaxed drinking hole is an English pub à la Laos. It's got the obligatory curved wooden bar with stools but the décor is distinctly local. There's a good range of booze and burgers on the menu and '70s, '80s and '90s classics in the background. Movies are screened nightly at 6pm and you can buy and sell sci-fi books.

More drinking holes:

Nao's Place (Map p136; Th Sisavangvong) Central spot with international sports on a big screen.

Lao Lao Garden (Map p138; Th Kingkitsarat) Two-for-one cocktails, Beerlao and shooters once the dining's done.

Entertainment

NIGHTCLUBS

Luang Prabang thus far has only two places where dancing is permitted. Both close at 11.30pm sharp.

Dao Fah (📍 9-11.30pm) A young Lao crowd packs this cavernous club, located off the road to the southern bus terminal. Live bands playing Lao and Thai pop alternate with DJs who spin rap and hip-hop. The bar serves Beerlao as well as mixers for patrons bringing their own liquor.

Muangsvua Hotel (Map p136; ☎ 212263; Th Phu Vao; 📍 9-11.30pm) In a low-ceilinged room behind the hotel, a Lao band plays the usual mix of Lao and Thai pop. Only Beerlao is sold.

THEATRE

Royal Theatre (Map p136; Th Sisavangvong; admission US\$6-15; 📍 shows 6pm) Inside the Royal Palace Museum compound, local performers put on a show that includes a *bqasii* ceremony, traditional dance and folk music. There are

traditional dances of Lao ethnic minorities such as the Phoo Noi and Hmong people.

CINEMA

There are several places in town where you can catch a flick.

Le Cinema (Map p138; Ban Xieng Mouane; tickets US\$3; 📍 6pm-midnight) In a laneway opposite the eastern wing of the Royal Palace, this ingenious spot enables you to hire a room and recent release DVD for the night. It's fun and cosy.

L'Étranger Books & Tea (Map p138; booksinlaos@yahoo.com; Th Kingkitsarat; 📍 7pm) Screens nightly films ranging from new blockbusters to old art house.

Martin's Pub (Map p136; Th Vatmou-Enna; 📍 6pm)

Also screens recent releases every night.

Shopping

HANDICRAFTS, ART, TEXTILES & ANTIQUES

Fibre2Fabric (Map p138; ☎ 254761; 71 Ban Wat Nong) This nonprofit gallery curates three exhibitions annually and promotes textiles from the diverse ethnic minorities of Laos. The quality is superb and the products are an education in Lao culture in themselves.

Kopnoi (Map p136; Th Vatmou-Enna) This shop targets the discerning shopper with east-meets-west clothing in natural fabrics and dyes, designer jewellery, homewares and handicrafts, books on Lao cuisine, architecture and crafts, packaged spices and teas and local art.

Naga Creations (Map p138; ☎ 020-7775005; Th Sisavangvong) Specialising in jewellery, Naga Creations produces individual masterpieces using a variety of precious stones and silver. All items are hand crafted and you can see the jewellers at work in the store. Suits all budgets.

OckPopTok (Map p138; ☎ 254406; Th Sisavangvong) This unique textile company offers naturally dyed, house-woven Lao silk and cotton, from which you can order custom-tailored clothing, as well as household decorative items. Lengths of fabric can also be purchased. OckPopTok also offers weaving classes (see Courses, p147).

Pathana Boupna Antique House (Map p136; ☎ 212262; 29/4 Ban Visoun) In an impressive old French mansion, Pathana Boupna carries antique statuary, jewellery, silverwork, Royal Lao government currency and old photos, mostly from the Lao owners' private collection. It also sells high-quality textiles from various ethnic groups. The late patriarch designed many of the costumes and ornaments used in the former Royal Palace.

Thithpeng Maniphone (Map p136; Ban Wat That) Thithpeng crafted silverware for Luang Prabang royalty before 1975 (Thailand's royal family are now some of his best customers). He has 15 apprentice silversmiths but still does the most delicate work himself. To get here follow the signs opposite the Maison Souvannaphoum.

Also available:

Atelier 15 Nagas Studio (Map p138; ☎ 567216; The Khem Khong) Contemporary Lao paintings.

Caruso Lao Handicraft (Map p138; ☎ 254574; Th Sakkarin) Beautiful homewares, photo frames, linen and silk.

MARKETS

Handicraft night market (cnr Th Sisavangvong & Th Kitsarat; 📍 5-11pm) Every evening this market assembles along Th Sisavangvong from the Royal Palace Museum to Th Kitsarat, closing this section of the street off to motor vehicles. It's one of Luang Prabang's biggest tourist lures. Low-lit and quiet, it's devoid of hard selling and is possibly the most tranquil market in Asia. Tens of dozens of traders sell silk scarves and wall hangings, plus Hmong appliqué blankets, T-shirts, clothing, shoes, paper, silver, bags, ceramics, bamboo lamps and more. It's incredibly cheap and because you're injecting currency directly into the local economy you *have* to feel good about spending dosh here.

Fresh produce market (📍 5.30am-4pm Sat-Mon) A colourful market that fills the street between Th Sisavangvong and the Mekong in Ban Pakam. You can watch locals stock up on leafy greens, eggs, dried shrimp and live frogs. It's very photogenic and best in the early morning.

Talat Phosy is a huge warehouselike structure built by the Chinese, encompassing the biggest market for fresh produce, meats, herbs and just about any other basic requisite of Lao life.

There's also a Chinese market, opposite the Luang Prabang Provincial Stadium on the outskirts of town, selling dry goods, textiles and hardware.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lao Airlines (Map p136; ☎ 212172; Th Pha Mahapatsaman) operates at least three daily flights between Luang Prabang and Vientiane (one way/return US\$62/118, 40 minutes), plus flights to Pakse (one way/return US\$135/258,

Monday and Thursday) and Phonsavan (one way/return US\$40/70, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday).

It's wise to confirm your flight the day before departure. Lao Airlines in Luang Prabang accepts credit cards and can book flights on THAI (between Laos and Thailand only). Most travel agents also book domestic and international flights; see p139 for details.

For information on international flights to Luang Prabang from Asia see p319. Don't forget that you'll need to pay US\$1/10 for domestic/international flights at the airport. It's an airport tax that isn't included in your ticket.

When flying into Luang Prabang, try to get a window seat – as the plane descends over the mountains in preparation for landing the view of the town is excellent.

The **Luang Prabang International Airport** (☎ 212173), 4km from the city centre, has a restaurant, **Lao Airlines** (☎ 212173) and **Bangkok Air** (☎ 253 253) offices, phonocard telephone, post office, exchange booth, a branch of Lao Development Bank, and an air-conditioned departure lounge.

BOAT

Ferries are a major form of transport between Luang Prabang and Huay Xai on the Thai border to the northwest. The main landing for long-distance Mekong River boats, at the northwestern end of Th Chao Phanya Kang, is called *Tha Heua Meh* (literally 'mail boat pier'; ferry boat pier on our map). A blackboard at the Navigation Office announces long-distance boat departures, but it's all in Lao. A second pier near the Royal Palace Museum is sometimes used when the river level is too low for the main pier.

Speedboats use a landing (Map p136; Charter Boat Pier) at Ban Don, 6km north of Luang Prabang. For charters, speedboat pilots usually ask for the equivalent of six passenger fares, but they'll go if you pay for four spaces – often they have paid cargo to carry, too. If you want to share the cost of hiring a speedboat with other passengers it's best to show up at the speedboat pier in Ban Don the day before you want to leave and see what your prospects are. Then show up again around 6am on the morning of your intended departure to queue. Speedboat fares are often quoted in Thai baht, though either kip or US dollars are acceptable payment. Travel agents in town also arrange speedboats.

Speedboat passengers are required to wear life vests and helmets but the helmets are very often substandard. Helmets or no, speedboat travel is ridiculously dangerous – see p304 for warnings on travelling by speedboat.

Tha Suang, Pak Beng & Huay Xai

This is the most popular way for visitors to travel between Huay Xai at the Thai border and Luang Prabang. The Lao border crossing at Huay Xai in Bokeo Province, across the Mekong River from Chiang Khong, Thailand, grants visas on arrival to most nationalities.

See p217 for details on Mekong River boat travel between Huay Xai, Pak Beng and Luang Prabang.

If you're heading to Hongsa in northern Sainyabuli Province, coming from Luang Prabang, take the slow boat from the ferry pier as far as Tha Suang (US\$8, half day), where you can continue on to Hongsa by jumbo. You can also disembark at Pak Beng (US\$10) and head north to Udomxai and Luang Nam Tha.

Smaller, faster speedboats from the pier in Ban Don pound up the Mekong to Tha Suang (US\$15, two hours), Pak Beng (US\$20, three hours) and Huay Xai (US\$30, six hours) in double the time.

Nong Khiaw & Muang Khua

Most passengers and cargo going to Nong Khiaw travel by road nowadays as it's much quicker than by boat. Slow boats still head up the Nam Ou to Nong Khiaw (US\$12, four or five hours) from the ferry pier, but less frequently than they used to. Dates are posted on a chalkboard in front of the Navigation Office in Luang Prabang about a week in advance of the departures. You can also book this through any number of tour operators in town. The Nong Khiaw landing is sometimes referred to as Muang Ngoi, or as Nam Bak, a larger village to the west.

The same situation applies to Muang Khua, further up the Nam Ou – it's more quickly reached by road than by slow boat. Slow boats do travel to Muang Khua (US\$20, eight to nine hours) when there are sufficient passengers, or on posted dates.

When there are sufficient passengers, speedboats travel from Luang Prabang to Nong Khiaw (US\$16, two hours) and Muang Khua (US\$30, four hours).

Be sure to inquire thoroughly as to river conditions before embarking on a Nam Ou

trip; from mid-February on it's not unusual for speedboat pilots to get stranded in Nong Khiaw, unable to bring their boats back until the rains arrive in May or June.

Tha Deua, Pak Lai & Vientiane

Once in a blue moon slow cargo boats travel between Luang Prabang and Vientiane (US\$40, around three days) via Tha Deua (US\$8, six hours). Passenger travel on these boats, except for merchants accompanying fragile cargo, is rare now that Rte 13 is sealed and fast. The fare depends on the size of your group, how much space is in the boat and your bargaining skills, but expect to pay around US\$40 to Vientiane, or about US\$8 to Tha Deua. Bear in mind that these boats are not kitted out with passenger seats like those travelling between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang. They are basically large floating trucks, and it actually makes for a brilliant experience.

When there are sufficient passengers, or they're chartered, speedboats travel downriver to Vientiane (US\$40, eight or nine hours) via Tha Deua (US\$15, one hour) and Pak Lai (US\$25, four to five hours).

BUS & TRUCK

Interprovincial buses and trucks – large *sāwngthāew* – operate out of two bus terminals in Luang Prabang. In general, vehicles going to destinations north of Luang Prabang leave from the northern bus terminal (on Rte 13 about 4km north of the town centre, past the turn-off for Luang Prabang International Airport) while those going south leave from the southern bus terminal (several kilometres south of the town centre near the Luang Prabang Provincial Stadium). There are a few exceptions to this, due to the fact that different transport companies operate in each terminal, and on certain routes they compete.

The following travel times are only estimates – in Laos such factors as number of passengers, number of stops, the weather and road conditions affect travel times. Departure times may also change so check for updates when you're in town.

Vientiane

From Luang Prabang public buses go to Vientiane (ordinary, \$9, 11 hours, five to eight daily; air-con, \$10, 11 hours, two daily) leave from the southern bus terminal. The same buses stop in Vang Vieng (ordinary, US\$7.50,

six to seven hours; air-con, US\$8.50, six to seven hours). The air-con buses leave between 6.30am and 9am in the morning.

For quicker and more comfortable transport, try the travel agents in town who can also arrange minivan transport (US\$18, eight hours, four daily) and VIP bus (US\$12, 10 hours, two daily) to Vientiane. The VIP buses aren't exactly modern, but they have air-con and once every seat is taken, they are full (as opposed to public buses which use the 'never full' approach).

Anyone who suffers motion sickness should take necessary precautions before the trip to Vang Vieng. See p113 for details on buses from Vientiane to Luang Prabang.

Udomxai, Luang Nam Tha & Phongsali

Luang Prabang is linked with Udomxai and Luang Nam Tha Province via paved roads. However, the road from Udomxai to Phonsavan is mostly unpaved. From the northern bus terminal, daily passenger trucks and buses go to Udomxai (US\$4.50, five hours, 8am), Luang Nam Tha (US\$7, eight hours, 9am and 4.30pm) and to Phongsali (US\$10, 15 hours, 4pm).

For further details on transport to and from these places, see the Getting There & Away sections for Udomxai (p192) and Luang Nam Tha (p200).

Nong Khiaw & Sam Neua

From the northern terminal, *sāwngthāew* and buses head north to Nong Khiaw (US\$3.20, four hours, two to five daily), and Sam Neua (US\$10, 16 hours, 4pm).

Xieng Khuang, Sainyabuli & Huay Xai

From the southern bus terminal there are daily buses to Phonsavan (US\$8.50, 10 hours, 8.30am), Sainyabuli (US\$4, five hours, 9am) and Huay Xai (US\$14, eight to 11 hours, 5pm), although in the rainy season it's best to take a boat up the Mekong River to reach Huay Xai due to the road conditions.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

From the airport into town, jumbos (motorised three-wheeled taxis) or minitrucks charge a uniform US\$5.50 per vehicle, and up to six can share the ride. In the reverse direction you can usually charter an entire jumbo for US\$2 to US\$4.

TO/FROM THE SPEEDBOAT LANDING

A shared jumbo into town from the speedboat landing in Ban Don costs around US\$1 per person depending on your bargaining skills. To charter one, figure on US\$4 to US\$6.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Most of the town is accessible on foot. Jumbos charge US\$0.40 per kilometre in town, although they usually just ask foreigners for US\$1 a ride.

Motorcycles can be hired from several shops in the town centre for US\$5 a day. Bicycles are available from many of the same shops, as well as from guesthouses, for between US\$1 and US\$3 a day depending on the condition of the bike.

AROUND LUANG PRABANG**Pak Ou Caves**

ຖໍ່ປ່າກອູ

About 25km by boat from Luang Prabang along the Mekong River, at the mouth of the Nam Ou, are the famous **Pak Ou caves** (admission US\$1). Two caves in the lower part of a limestone cliff facing the river are crammed with Buddha images of all styles and sizes (but mostly classic Luang Prabang standing Buddhas). The lower cave, known as Tham Ting, is entered from the river by a series of steps and can easily be seen in daylight. Stairs to the left of Tham Ting lead around to the upper cave, Tham Phum, which is deeper and requires artificial light for viewing – be sure to bring a torch (flashlight) if you want to see both caves.

On the way to Pak Ou, most people have the boat stop at small villages on the banks of the Mekong. Opposite the caves at the mouth of the Nam Ou, in front of an impressive limestone cliff called Pha Hen, is a favourite spot for local fishers.

VILLAGES NEAR PAK OU

The most common village stop on the way to the caves is **Ban Xang Hai**. The name means ‘Jar-Maker Village’ because at one time that was the cottage industry here. Nowadays the jars come from elsewhere, and the community of around 70 fills them with *lào-lào* made in the village. Australian archaeologists have excavated pots beneath the village that may be 2000 or more years old.

At **Ban Thin Hong**, opposite the jar village and close to Pak Ou, a cave excavated in early 2000

has yielded artefacts dating back 8000 years, including stone, bronze and metal tools, pottery, fabrics and skeletons.

During the late dry season (from January to April) villagers paddle out to sand bars in the middle of the Mekong and pan for gold using large wooden platters.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

You can hire boats to Pak Ou from Luang Prabang’s charter boat landing on the Mekong River. A longtail boat costs US\$15 for one to three people and US\$20 for four to five people, including petrol. The trip takes two hours upriver, and one hour down, not including optional stops at villages. Speedboats from Ban Don (US\$15, 30 minutes upriver and 20 to 25 minutes down) can carry up to six passengers and take up to two hours for the total trip.

Travel agencies and guesthouses around town advertise tours for US\$5 per person.

You can also get to Pak Ou by jumbo. To the village of Ban Pak Ou it costs US\$7 for one or two people, US\$10 for three to four, or US\$12 for up to eight. From here, you then take a ferry (US\$1.50) to the caves.

Ban Xang Khong

This comely village sits on the banks of the Mekong River, about 3km east of the town centre, and is home to numerous weaving and textile houses. The work is very fine quality and cheaper than comparable products sold in town. Often you’ll be buying directly from the artist, and you can watch some of the weavers in action. There are also two excellent cheap paper galleries and some craft shops. All the houses are scattered along the one dirt road that runs parallel to the Mekong. It’s a pleasant walk or bike ride from the town centre (around 40 to 60 minutes). Alternatively a *sǎwngthāew* there and back should cost about US\$4.

Among the best houses:

Lao Textile Natural Dyes (☎ 252803) Owned by the same family that runs OckPopTok (p155), with work of the same high standard.

Miss Bouekham Silk (☎ 253988) Silk and cotton textiles.

Miss Bouvane Sydomphan Lao Silk Shop

(☎ 253863) Brightly coloured, very distinctive pieces.

Ms Boualay Douang Dara (☎ 253771) Less chance of finding individual pieces, but the quantity on offer keeps prices very cheap.

Nalong Kone Paper & Souvenir Shop Elephant-dung paper impregnated with flowers and colour is made into lanterns, photo albums, wall prints, gift cards and all manner of gifts.

Ban Phanom & Mouhot’s Tomb

ບ້ານພະນົມ/ສສານຫມູ່ຫົວ

This Thai Lü village, 6km east of Luang Prabang, is also well known for cotton and silk hand-weaving. You can wander around the village and watch the weavers in action on their hand looms, or stop in at the textile centre to view a variety of potential purchases. For a while Ban Phanom prices were higher than in Luang Prabang, but these days Luang Prabang has gone much more upmarket and Ban Phanom textiles can be a good bargain.

Beyond Ban Phanom near the river stands the tomb of the French explorer Henri Mouhot, best known as the person who ‘discovered’ Angkor Wat. Mouhot perished of malaria in Luang Prabang on 10 November 1861, and the French erected a tomb over his grave six years later. The last entry in his journal was ‘Have pity on me, O my God’ and his engraved tomb was neglected until found by foreign aid staff in 1990. Mouhot’s simple monument is about 4km along the Nam Khan from Ban Phanom; follow the road along the river until you see a sign on the left, descend a track towards the river, then walk about 300m along a path (upriver from the sign) to reach the whitewashed tomb.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Many visitors ride hired bikes or motorbikes to Ban Phanom and Mouhot’s tomb. If you’re pedalling, note that the terrain is hilly, so don’t forget to bring a bottle of drinking water. By motorbike it takes only around 40 minutes.

Sǎwngthāew from Luang Prabang to Ban Phanom leave from Talat Dala several times a day for US\$0.70 per person.

Tat Kuang Si

ຕາດກວາງສີ

This beautiful spot 32km south of town has a wide, many-tiered waterfall tumbling over limestone formations into a series of cool, turquoise pools. With thick banks of green and florid vegetation on either side, the setting is impossibly picturesque and photogenic. The lower level of the falls has been turned into a well-maintained **public park** (parking US\$0.25, admission US\$2) with shelters and picnic tables;

some of the trees near the waterfall have been labelled. Just past the entrance are two enclosures, one housing sun bears and the other a tiger. All have been confiscated from poachers and are kept here in preference to releasing them to the same certain fate.

A trail ascends through the forest along the left side of the falls to a second tier that is more private (most visitors stay below) and has a pool large enough for swimming and splashing around. A cave behind the falls here goes back 10m. For a view of the stream that feeds into the falls you can continue along a more slippery extension of the trail to the top of the falls. The best time to visit is between the end of the monsoon in November and the peak of the dry season in April.

On the way to Kuang Si you’ll pass Ban Tat Paen, a scenic Khamu village with a cool stream, rustic dam and several miniature waterfalls. **Vanvisa 2 Guest House** (per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$20) is a simple Lao-style wooden guesthouse in this village, operated by the owner of the Vanvisa Guest House in Luang Prabang. With advance notice, they can arrange cooking classes for US\$15 per person.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Freelance guides in Luang Prabang offer trips by jumbo for US\$5 per person for two people, US\$4 per person for three to five people, or US\$3 for six to eight. An alternative to going by jumbo all the way would be to take a boat an hour (25km) down the Mekong and do a shorter jumbo ride over to the falls. Freelancers can arrange the latter trip for about the same cost as a straight jumbo trip.

Many visitors make their way to Tat Kuang Si by hired bicycle or motorcycle, stopping in scenic villages along the way. If you opt to cycle be warned that it’s a dirt, rocky road, and the climb in the midday sun can be taxing so take plenty of water.

Tat Sae

ນ້ຳຕົກຕາດສ້

Found at a conjunction of the Huay Sae and the Nam Khan, the falls at Tat Sae feature multilevel limestone formations similar to those at Kuang Si except that the resulting pools are more numerous, the falls are shorter in height, and the site is much closer to Luang Prabang. Popular with local picnickers on weekends, this place is almost empty during the week.

A 35-minute, 15km jumbo ride south of town will take you to the turn-off from Rte 13, then it's 2km to the pristine Lao village of Ban Aen on the Nam Khan. Jumbo drivers will travel to Ban Aen for US\$6.75 for one to two persons, US\$8 for three to four, or US\$9 for up to eight persons, including waiting time in the village while you visit the falls for a few hours. You could also easily reach Ban Aen by bicycle – there's a sign reading 'Tat Se' at the Rte 13 turn-off.

From the riverbanks at Ban Aen you can hire a boat to the falls – only five minutes upstream – for US\$1 return.

The falls are best visited from August to November when there is still an abundance of water in the pools.

NONG KHIAW

ໜອງຂົວ
☎ 071

Nong Khiaw is a sleepy market village with a humbling backdrop in northern Luang Prabang Province. It dozes on the west bank of the Nam Ou, which cuts a languid swathe between close mountains, soaring in a haphazard tumble of slate and green. Arriving at the town's dry and dusty bus stop isn't the best introduction and many travellers breeze through in favour of longer stays at Muang Ngoi Neua. But once you venture out, particularly if you cross the striking bridge to Ban Sop Houn, where the Nam Ou meets the Nam Houn, the surrounding scenery rears in dramatic form.

Locals sometimes refer to Nong Khiaw as Muang Ngoi (the name of the surrounding district). As a result many visitors confuse this Muang Ngoi with the Muang Ngoi Neua – a town found about an hour north of Nong Khiaw by boat.

In addition to Tham Pha Thok (see below), there are other caves in the vicinity of Nong Khiaw, and also a few Hmong villages within easy trekking distance.

Nong Khiaw and Ban Sop Houn have electricity from 6pm to 10pm.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Fine **trekking** opportunities present themselves in the range of wooded karst around Nong Khiaw. A 40-minute walk will take you to **Tham Pha Thok**, a limestone cave where villagers lived during the Second Indochina War, and to a nearby waterfall. To find the

cave, walk 2.5km east of the bridge along Rte 1, then look for a clearly visible cave mouth in a limestone cliff to your right, about 100m from the road. Descend along a path from the road to reach the cave.

Longer treks to Hmong and Khamu villages are arranged by the Sunset Guest House (opposite) for around US\$10 per day. You can also try your hand at traditional river fishing with nets in the wide rocky shallows of the Nam Ou. Ask at Bamboo Paradise (opposite) for more info.

The **GreenHeart Foundation** (www.wowlao.com) based at Chan-a-Mar Guest House is a two-fold operation: GreenHeart Gallery – at the front of the property, selling Lao and Bhutan textiles – and GreenHeart Tours. The latter offers small-group tours to the region with an emphasis on traditional Lao culture and cuisine and a commitment to cultural preservation. GreenHeart also supports a bomb-removal program and takes on administrative volunteers occasionally, for those looking to inject more than currency into the local community.

Sleeping & Eating

Near the bridge and river landing there are a number of rustic but charming and cheap guesthouses. Most have restaurants attached.

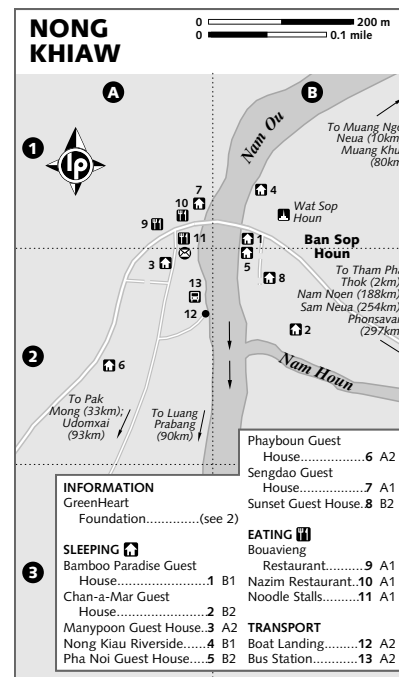
NONG KHIAW

Manypoan Guest House (r US\$2) The friendly Manypoan offers rooms with mosquito nets and shared bathroom downstairs. Its restaurant boasts one of the better local guesthouse kitchens.

Phayboun Guest House (r US\$2-6) Phayboun consists of a few rooms in a two-storey wooden house that's in better condition than most of the others in town. Rooms have private bathrooms and screened windows to keep the mosquito at bay.

Sengdao Guest House (r US\$8, without bathroom US\$3) With the best views from the Nong Khiaw side of the river, this guesthouse has simple huts or pleasant bamboo bungalows with clean en suites. All rooms have mosquito nets and fans. There's also a fairy-lit restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2), open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, overlooking the river.

Bouavieng Restaurant (meals US\$0.50-2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple restaurant serves a variety of fairly good Lao rice and noodle dishes.



Nazim Restaurant (meals US\$2-3; ☎ lunch & dinner) Good subcontinent curries are to be had at this open-walled restaurant, which also advertises itself as (not-so-Indian) Deen's Restaurant.

There are also noodle stalls selling tasty *fōe* (US\$0.50 to US\$1) near the bridge.

BAN SOP HOUN

The best views of the Nam Ou are from this side of the river and most guesthouses take advantage of them with balconies.

Bamboo Paradise Guest House (r US\$2) The friendly owners make this spot a good choice. The decent bungalows have floor mattresses, visitors are encouraged to brush up on their Lao language skills, and owners can organise guides for trekking.

Sunset Guest House (r US\$12, s/d without bathroom US\$2.50/5) This Lao-style guesthouse on stilts has simple rooms with floor mattresses, fans and mosquito nets in a rickety bamboo-thatch house. There are also much more comfortable bungalows with en suites and private balconies overlooking the river. A common sitting area with floor cushions

provides great sunset views. Good Lao and Thai food is available.

Pha Noi Guest House (r US\$3) Right next to the bridge, this spot has five rickety but pleasant bamboo bungalows with small balconies and basic bathrooms attached. They have a fine view of the river.

Nong Khiaw Riverside (☎ 254770; www.nongkhiaw.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$12/16) Every now and then you stumble across a delightful bargain that makes you feel like royalty – this fits the bill perfectly. This quiet resort has huge bungalows with timber floors, bamboo walls, stone bathrooms and wide balconies. The four-poster beds have high-slung mosquito nets and there are ceiling fans and writing desks in every room. There's also a good restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$3), open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, serving tasty Lao food, and the setting is gorgeous.

Chan-a-Mar Guest House (www.wowlao.com; r US\$100) Exclusive in that it's small and pricey, this spot has a modest number of bamboo bungalows with lovely open-air bathrooms overlooking the surrounding foliage. Each bungalow has comfortable beds, mosquito nets, fans and sleeps up to three people. Rates include a large breakfast along with evening cocktails and appetisers. The bungalows are pleasant but a stretch for the price, although your money also supports the GreenHeart Foundation based here (see opposite).

Getting There & Away

Rte 1 crosses the river here via a steel bridge. Rte 13 north from Luang Prabang meets Rte 1 about 33km west of town at Pak Mong.

BOAT

Boat travel along the Nam Ou south of Nong Khiaw has largely been eclipsed by travel along the improved Rte 13, but it's still possible. See p156 for information on boat travel from Luang Prabang. In high season boats heading to Muang Ngoi Neua (US\$1.80, one hour) leave regularly until about 3pm. In low season they're less regular, but boats usually tout for business between noon and 2pm, when buses arrive from Luang Prabang. Tickets are bought at an office at the bus station. These boats infrequently continue on to Muang Khua (US\$10, seven hours).

BUS & SÄWNGTHÄEW

Säwngthäew going to Udomxai (US\$2.50, three hours, three daily) leave from the west end of the bridge. You can also take one of the more frequent *säwngthäew* southward to Pak Mong (US\$1.80, two hours), then change to another *säwngthäew* to Udomxai (US\$2, two to three hours from Pak Mong). *Säwngthäew* and buses to Luang Prabang (US\$3.20, four hours, two daily) depart between 8am and 11am; the earliest is usually a public bus.

If you're heading east towards Hua Phan or Xieng Khuang, you can get a bus to Sam Neua (US\$7, 12 hours, one daily).

MUANG NGOI NEUA

ເມືອງງອຍເໜືອ

The tourist trail has well and truly found this idyllic village, tucked away on a peninsula on the Nam Ou, but unless you're here in peak season the locals still outweigh the *falang*. Flanked by shadowy, majestic mountains on all sides, it's a pretty spot to hang the boots for a few days, or rather give them a workout on some picturesque trekking. Because it's cut off from regular roadways by that steep mountain range, Muang Ngoi Neua remains isolated and small (perhaps that's why the rooster cacophony seems louder here), and the narrow dirt footpaths lined with coconut palms that act as roads are trafficked only by unhurried pedestrians or two-wheeled transport.

Like most river villages in Laos, Muang Ngoi Neua's basic layout parallels the river on which the village once depended for its traditional livelihoods, fishing and farming. Tourism, however, has now become the main source of income and every second building seems to be a guesthouse or restaurant in need of business.

Information

Generators provide electricity from 6pm to 10pm. There's no internet or telephone facilities, so it's wise to let anxious loved ones know you may be out of range (some travellers come for a couple of days, but stay a couple of weeks). You can exchange US dollars at several guesthouses, but for rather unexceptional rates, and a couple of pharmacies sell basic medicines.

Sights & Activities

You'll find a sea of signs advertising guides for fishing trips, tubing, kayaking and trekking

in town. Some guides speak decent English, which is imperative if you want to enjoy the cultural aspect of any activity. Treks cost US\$5 to US\$10 per day, depending on the destination, and tubing costs around US\$1.50 per day.

Recommended, English-speaking guides include **Sang Tours** (☎ 8am-9pm), not far from the boat landing on the main 'street', and **Lao Youth Travel** (www.laoyouthtravel.com; ☎ 7.30-10.30am & 1.30-6pm), to the left of the boat landing. Run by a former village school teacher, **Muang Ngoi Tour Office** (☎ 7-8am & 6-7pm) is located behind the main street 300m south of the boat landing – look for the signs directing you. From here you can organise small-group treks to Hmong and Khamu villages for around US\$8 per day including food, and fishing trips.

CAVES

Behind the village and its rice fields sits a curtain of cliffs riddled with caves, streams and forest. Two of these caves can easily be visited in under an hour's walk. At the southern end of the village, turn left (east) in front of Kaikeo Restaurant, and follow the path through a large rural schoolyard and into an area of brush and secondary forest. Just past the schoolyard there is a shelter where village volunteers collect an admission fee of US\$1 per person.

After a pleasant 5km walk you'll come to a crystal-clear stream running into **Tham Kang** (Middle Cave), a large limestone cavern entrance on your left. You can either wade into the cave via the stream – which can become rather deep in spots during the rainy season – or climb a limestone bank along the left side of the stream. The roof of this cave is at least 30m high for some distance, after which the floor descends into darkness.

About an additional five minutes' walk along the same trail is **Tham Pha Kao** (Holy Image Cave), with a much smaller entry and a small stone Buddha image to one side. According to Speleo Nederland, a Dutch caving group that has explored both caves, Tham Kang and Tham Pha Kao are connected via a subterranean passageway.

Beyond the caves you can easily walk to mixed Lao and Khamu villages of **Huay Bo** (3km), **Huay Sen** (4km) and **Ban Na** (another 1km from Huay Sen). If you fancy a village stay, try the **Konsavan Guest House** (US\$1) in Huay Bo.

TAT MOK

Twenty minutes downriver by boat is a trail that leads to a series of falls called Tat Mok. The walk from the landing to the falls takes about an hour. The third in the series reaches 40m tall, and you'll find pools for a cool dip at all three.

TEMPLES

Muang Ngoi, which may date back to the 15th century, once had three Buddhist monasteries: **Wat Neua** at the northern end of town, **Wat Kang** in the middle and **Wat Tai** in the south. All three were destroyed during the Second Indochina War, but among the remains of Wat Tai you can still see the main pediment for the original *sim*, as well as a pedestal for an old Buddha that once sat at one end of the *sim*. That image has long disappeared, to be replaced by a cement Buddha and a few smaller wooden Buddhas beneath a little tin-roof shelter at one end of the pediment. The original brick-and-stucco entry stairway to the slightly elevated wat grounds is also still standing.

Of Wat Kang there appears to be virtually no trace.

Wat Neua, at the northern end of the village not far from the main boat landing, has been rebuilt. As at Wat Tai, the ground supporting the monastery was artificially raised to protect the facilities from flooding. Here again you can see the original steps ascending the raised earth. It appears the current *sim* may have been rebuilt atop the original brick-and-stucco pediment. Now the only functioning wat in the village, it has been renamed Wat Okat Muang Ngoi. The Wat's drum often resounds at 4am, providing an early but resonant wake-up call.

Sleeping

Most guesthouses here are strung out along the main footpath that leads from the landing, down through the centre of the village. Most consist of either bamboo-thatch huts or bamboo rooms in a longhouse, with shared bathroom. Many have attached restaurants. Be warned that rats can be a problem in Muang Ngoi Neua.

Saylom Guest House (r US\$2) This guesthouse is on the right-hand side of the boat ramp as you walk into town, and has clean bungalows with decent beds, mosquito nets and hammocks outside. All have shared bath-

rooms. The owners are friendly and the restaurant has good river views.

Sunset Guest House & Talee 2 (r US\$2) At the southern end of the village, this guesthouse is tucked away from the sounds of generators at night. Hastily built bamboo bungalows stand side-by-side along the river, all with mattresses on the floor, mosquito nets, river views and hammocks.

Ning Ning (r US\$2) The handful of simple bungalows here have mosquito nets, hammocks and wee balconies. The deck restaurant here has a lovely outlook.

Phetdavanh Guest House (r US\$2) This sturdy two-storey building on the main strip is clean and secure. Rooms are rat-free and have crisp sheets and tidy bathrooms, but the structure is devoid of hammocks and river views.

Lattanavongsa Guest House (r US\$5) A step up from the bamboo bungalow brigade, this friendly place to the left of the boat landing has a solid concrete structure (although the walls are bamboo), where rooms have clean, tiled private bathrooms but no fans. The beds are monastically firm but the whole place sits around a grassy lawn with a statue fashioned from (spent) UXO (unexploded ordnance).

Aloune Mai Guest House (r US\$5) Off the path and away from the river, this is a good spot for a quiet night's sleep. The relatively recent structure contains solid timber and bamboo rooms with private bathrooms. It's signposted off the main path through town.

More options:

Kham's Place Bungalows & Restaurant (r US\$1)

Simple bungalows and cold beer.

Shanti Guest House (r US\$1) Small and simple.

Eating

Sengdala Bakery (meals US\$0.50-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This bakery-restaurant serves good rice, noodles, curries, soups and salads, but also distinguishes itself with great pancakes and baguettes. Water-bottle refills cost US\$0.10 per litre.

Nang Phone Keo Restaurant (meals US\$0.50-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The '*falang* roll' of peanut butter, sticky rice and vegies lure ravenous travellers to the open-air deck of this restaurant on the main street. Also whips up good *fœ*.

Lattanavongsa Guest House (meals US\$1-2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant at this

guesthouse cooks outstanding spring rolls and a hearty noodle soup. The open-air deck is large and ambient.

Basic Lao and Western food including omelettes, soups and fried rice can be found at **Sky** (meals US\$0.80-1.50) and **Shanti** (meals US\$0.80-1.50).

Getting There & Away

Regular boats ply between Nong Khiaw and Muang Ngoi Neua (US\$1.80, one hour). Departures are most frequent in the morning, with the last boat leaving Nong Khiaw at around 3pm or 4pm. Boats also run far less frequently to Muang Khua (US\$8, five hours). If you have the opportunity to take this trip, do! This section of the Nam Ou is isolated and the river cuts a khaki ribbon through an endless verdant spread.

NAM BAK & PAK MONG

ນ້ຳປາກ/ປາກມອງ

These two towns, respectively 23km and 33km west of Nong Khiaw, are little more than supply depots along Rte 1 between the Nam Ou and Udomxai. Pak Mong, at the junction of Rtes 1 and 13, has eclipsed Nam Bak since the sealing of Rte 13 north from Luang Prabang. Both towns have post offices, guesthouses (one in Pak Mong, two in Nam Bak) and noodle shops, but Pak Mong is the place to make bus connections: west to Udomxai (US\$2, two to three hours) and Luang Nam Tha (US\$3.50, six hours); east to Hua Phan and Xieng Khuang Provinces; and south to Luang Prabang (US\$2.30, two hours).

XIENG KHUANG PROVINCE

Xieng Khuang Province is marked by contrasts, cultural and geographical. In the centre, broad ochre hills, laid bare from logging and slash and burn agriculture, coat the semiflat terrain. Orderly farms intersperse the brown hues, and the eucalypts and pine plantations invoke antipodeans impressions. As the province stretches north it finds the base of Hua Phan's mountainous ascent. Flying in from the south, one is struck by the beauty of high green mountains, rugged karst formations and verdant valleys. But as

the plane begins to descend, you notice how much of the province is pockmarked with bomb craters in which little or no vegetation grows. Xieng Khuang was one of the most devastated provinces of the war. Virtually every town and village in the province was bombed at some point between 1964 and 1973.

The province has a total population of around 230,000 people, mostly comprised of lowland Lao, Vietnamese, Thai Dam, Hmong and Phuan. The original capital, Xieng Khuang, was almost totally bombed out, so the capital was moved to Phonsavan (often spelt Phonsavanh) after the 1975 change of government. Near Phonsavan is the mysterious Thong Hai Hin (Plain of Jars).

The altitude (average 1200m) in central Xieng Khuang creates an excellent climate – not too hot in the hot season, not too cold in the cool season and not too wet in the rainy season. The coldest months are December and January, when visitors should come with sweaters or pullovers, plus a light jacket for nights and early mornings.

History

Although briefly a part of the Lan Xang kingdom in the 16th century, Xieng Khuang has more often than not been an independent principality or a vassal state of Vietnam under the name of Tran Ninh. From the early 19th century until 1975, central Xieng Khuang – including the Plain of Jars – was a recurring battle zone. In 1832 the Vietnamese captured the Phuan king of Xieng Khuang, publicly executed him in Huế and made the kingdom a prefecture of Annam, forcing people to adopt Vietnamese dress and customs. Chinese Haw also ravaged Xieng Khuang in the late 19th century, which is one of the reasons Xieng Khuang accepted Siamese and French protection later that century.

Major skirmishes between the Free Lao and the Viet Minh took place from 1945 to 1946, and as soon as the French left Indochina the North Vietnamese commenced a build-up of troops to protect Hanoi's rear flank. By 1964 the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao had at least 16 anti-aircraft emplacements on the Plain of Jars, along with a vast underground arsenal. By the end of the 1960s, this major battlefield was undergoing almost daily bombing by American planes, as well as ground combat between

the US-trained and supplied Hmong army and the forces of the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao.

A single 1969 air campaign – part of the secret war waged in Laos by the US Air Force and the CIA – annihilated at least 1500 buildings in the town of Xieng Khuang, along with some 2000 more on the Plain of Jars, permanently erasing many small towns and villages off the map. Continuous saturation bombing forced virtually the entire population to live in caves; 'The bombs fell like a man sowing seed' according to one surviving villager.

North Vietnamese troops did their share of damage on the ground as well, destroying nearby Muang Sui, a city famous for its temples, and virtually all towns or villages held by the Royal Lao Army (RLA) in the west of the province.

Now that eastern Xieng Khuang is peaceful, village life has returned to a semblance of normality, although the enormous amount of war debris and UXO spread across the central and eastern areas of the province are a deadly legacy that will remain here for generations to come.

PHONSAVAN

ໂພນສະຫວັນ

☎ 061 / pop 60,000

It may not be the prettiest of Laos' provincial capitals, but urban charm isn't what brings tourists to Xieng Khuang's largest city. They arrive in droves to visit the Plain of Jars and other sights in the area. Most congregate in the central crisscross of streets, peppered with none-too-appealing buildings and a hodgepodge of new and old guesthouses. But Phonsavan sprawls itself over a much larger distance, and the human milieu of tourists and locals, combined with the undulating backdrop, holds a bucolic charm.

Traditionally, the area surrounding Phonsavan and the former capital of Xieng Khuang has been a centre of Phuan language and culture (part of the Thai-Kadai family, like Lao, Siamese and Thai tribal). The local Vietnamese presence continues to increase and you'll hear the Vietnamese language in the streets almost as frequently as Lao and Phuan.

Outside the province most Lao (including Lao Airlines) still call the capital 'Xieng Khuang'.

Information

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 195)

Fire (☎ 190)

Police (☎ 191, 312449)

Mines Advisory Group (MAG; ☎ 4-8pm) Office for the British organisation involved in clearing UXO in the province; see p167.

INTERNET ACCESS

Hot Net (Rte 7; per hr US\$3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Slow internet connections.

Phoukham Guest House (☎ 312121; per hr US\$3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Similarly slow internet access.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Lao-Mongolian Friendship Hospital (☎ 312166)

Good for minor needs, but medical emergencies will need to be taken to Vientiane.

MONEY

Travel agents in town also offer currency exchange.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 312188) Currency exchange; has two branches.

POST

Post office (☎ 312005; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Has a domestic phone service.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Provincial Tourist Office (☎ 312217) Useful for simple information if you can find any staff. Private travel agencies are a better option.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Tours to the Plain of Jars can be booked through guesthouses and a number of travel agents for US\$10 to US\$12 per person in a mini-van of around eight passengers. The following also offer tours further afield and transport bookings.

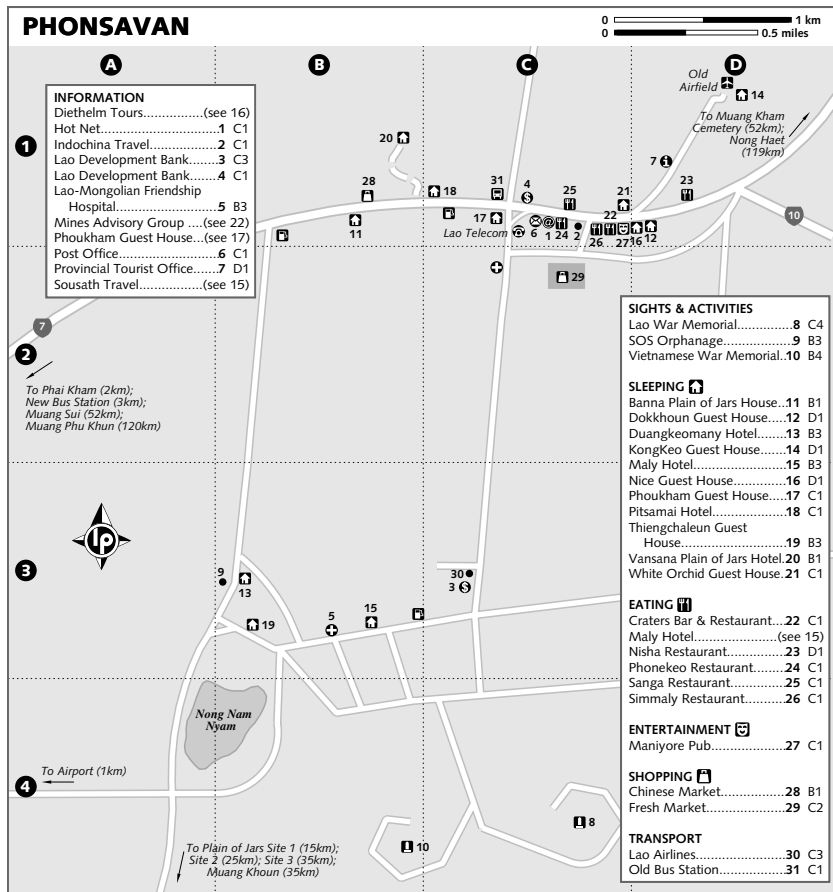
Diethelm Tours (☎ 213200, 020-5561116) Plain of Jars and Muang Khoun tours plus kayaking on the Nam Nguen from May to September.

Indochina Travel (☎ 312121, 020-5975556)

Sousath Travel (☎ 312031; www.malyht.laotel.com; Maly Hotel) A reader fave. Trips further afield include Tham Piu, Muang Sui, Sam Neua and Long Cheng (former site of the CIA's infamous mountain base during the Second Indochina War).

Dangers & Annoyances

Take care when walking in the fields around Phonsavan as UXO are common. Muddy



areas are sometimes dotted with 'bomblets' – fist-sized explosives that are left over from cluster bombs dropped in the 1970s.

Sights

Just south of town are two major war memorials, each standing on a different hill-top about 1km apart. One is Lao and the other Vietnamese, both in the shape of Lao-style stupas. The hill-top with the **Lao War Memorial** (☀️ sunrise-sunset) affords sweeping views of Phonsavan. Built in 1998, the monument is inscribed with the slogan 'The nation remembers your sacrifice'. Large, polished granite slabs standing nearby bear the inscribed names of PL soldiers who died in the area. The stupa-like monument allegedly

contains the bones of 4500 who died during the war.

At the **Vietnamese War Memorial** (🌅 sunrise-sunset), the faux stupa contains the bones of Vietnamese soldiers who died in battle in northeastern Laos, and is emblazoned with the inscription 'Lao-Vietnamese solidarity and generosity forever'. If the gates are locked, wait for a caretaker to come along and unlock them.

East of town is the large **Muang Khan Cemetery** – unique because it mixes together Thai Dam animist tombs, Catholic headstones and Lao *thât kádyuk* (Buddhist reliquary).

There's a German-funded **SOS Orphanage** just west of the main crux of town. You can visit students on weekdays during school

hours and on Saturday mornings; the visitor book here indicates that it's a positive experience on both sides. When you arrive, ask the nearest staff member what the best method of involvement is – it may be joining teachers in a classroom or something as simple as playing football with the kids.

Sleeping BUDGET

KongKeo Guest House (☎️ 211354; www.kongkeojar.com; r US\$4-5) Hidden off the main street, the popular KongKeo has four spartan rooms with shared bathroom, or there's a scattering of great en-suite bungalows with cool interiors. The industrious owner can organise tours.

Dokkhoun Guest House (☎️ 312189; r US\$5-8) In two multistorey blocks, the ever-popular Dokkhoun has spartan rooms with mosquito nets and good mattresses. The more expensive rooms have private showers and TVs although they're a tad dark and dank.

Nice Guest House (r US\$6) If the grouting holds up in this new guesthouse then it will indeed remain very nice. Clean and generous rooms contain firm beds, warm covers, ceiling fans

and petite, pretty bathrooms with hot water. Rooms upstairs share a balcony.

Banna Plain of Jars House (☎️ 212484; www.bannagroup.com; r US\$10) This polished guesthouse has unadorned but neat rooms upstairs with tiled floors and comfy beds. Some have small TVs and some lack sunlight so ask to see a few before you settle. A small and cheery restaurant downstairs serves breakfast.

Pitsamai Hotel (☎️ 211678; r US\$10) This small and personable hotel has wee but welcoming rooms with immaculate tiled floors, frilly floral décor, small TVs and compact bathrooms. They're fan-cooled and have big sunny windows.

Thiengchaleun Guest House (☎️ 211774; r US\$10-15) This isolated and pleasant guesthouse has sunny rooms with pastel hues, large Western-style bathrooms, small TVs and ceiling fans. The pricier rooms are bigger and have small lounge settings.

Phoukham Guest House (☎️ 312121; r US\$4-5) Opposite the bus station, the rooms in this shophouse-style building are cheap and compact, with warm-water bathrooms and lumpy beds. The price includes 20 minutes

UXO IN XIENG KHUANG

Unexploded munitions, mortar shells, white phosphorous canisters (used to mark bomb targets), land mines and cluster bombs of French, Chinese, American, Russian and Vietnamese manufacture left behind from nearly 100 years of warfare have affected up to half of the population in terms of land deprivation and accidental injury or death. A distressing profusion of UXO are still imbedded in rice fields, beneath schools, houses and playgrounds, and even in the branches of bamboo trees, where they lodged themselves when the trees were seedlings. Many of the reported unexploded ordnance (UXO) accidents that have occurred in Xieng Khuang happened during the first five years immediately following the end of the war, when many villagers returned to areas of the province they had evacuated years earlier. Today about 40% of the estimated 30–60 casualties per year are children, who continue to play with found UXO – especially the harmless-looking, ball-shaped 'bomb light units' (BLUs, or bombies) left behind by cluster bombs – in spite of public warnings.

Hunters also open or attempt to open UXO to extract gunpowder and steel pellets for their long-barrelled muskets – a risky ploy that has claimed many casualties. Several groups are working steadily to clear the province of UXO, including the Lao National UXO Programme (UXO Lao), financed by a UN trust fund that has significantly increased the availability of multilateral aid for this purpose.

Tourists can play a role in reducing the number of UXO and their casualties by visiting the **Mines Advisory Group (MAG)** (☎️ 4-8pm) office in Phonsavan. MAG is a British organisation that has been clearing UXO in conjunction with UXO Lao since 1994. The office has an information display and sells T-shirts and DVDs to fund its operations. Buying a US\$10 T-shirt will not only contribute to the organisation's efforts, but will also raise awareness simply by being on your back. The DVDs are distressing but important in that they show the full scale of the trauma, from footage of US bombers in action to the ongoing casualties of this horrific legacy.

of internet use and the staff can be very helpful with travel info.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Maly Hotel (☎ 312031, www.malyht.laotel.com; r US\$8-50; 🍽️) The well-run Maly offers 30 comfortable rooms in a variety of standards. Rates vary according to the size of the room and whether they have a TV and/or balcony, but the best value are the US\$15 rooms. A cosy restaurant downstairs has some of the best Lao and Western cooking in town, especially if you order in advance. The owner speaks good English, German and French, and Sousath Travel is located here (p165).

White Orchid Guest House (☎ 312403; r US\$10-40) A commendable option in the midrange bracket, this hotel has a range of rooms from small, dark and cheap, to bright and clean with private bathrooms. The top floor and top-priced rooms have oceans of room and lacquered tables settings. All rooms have TV and a modicum of Lao textiles and décor.

Duangkeomany Hotel (☎ 020-5516553; r US\$25) The best value in town for fussy travellers, this hotel has large carpeted halls off which spring capacious rooms with bright interiors, crisp bedding, TVs, wardrobes and gleaming bathrooms with tubs. Excellent value.

Vansana Plain of Jars Hotel (☎ 213170; vphotel@laotel.com; s/d/ste US\$30/40/50) Opulent by Phonsavan standards, this grand hotel occupies its own summit at the top of a gravel road. The commodious rooms have plush carpeting, large TVs, minibars, tasteful décor and big tubs in the bathroom. Each also has a small balcony with great views over town. The VIP suites are huge. Popular with tours.

Eating

Phonekeo Restaurant (meals US\$1; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly noodle shop serves the best *fôe* in town.

Simmaly Restaurant (☎ 211013; meals US\$1-1.50; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Simmaly's menu may be simple, but what it whips up it does well. Fried spicy meats, rice dishes and good noodle soups. Service is friendly and speedy and it's popular with both tourists and locals.

Sanga Restaurant (Sa-Nga; ☎ 312318; meals \$1-4; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) The clean and well-run Sanga, near the market and post office, offers an ex-

tensive menu of Chinese, Thai and Lao food, including good *yám* (a tart, spicy Thai-style salad), *tôm yám* (spicy lemon grass-based soup), *khào khùu* (fried rice) and *fôe*, plus a few Western food items.

Maly Hotel (meals US\$1-5) This hotel has a great selection of Lao and Western food. It's especially good during the rainy season when *hét wái* (wild matsutake mushrooms) are plentiful.

Nisha Restaurant (meals US\$1-4; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tuck into delicious aloo ghoibi, dosas, tikka masalas and rogan josh at this spacious Indian diner. The list of vegetarian options is long and you can down a whole tandoori chicken for US\$4.

Craters Bar & Restaurant (☎ 020-7805775; meals US\$2-4; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This very cosmopolitan eatery has a mostly *falang* menu of club sandwiches, pizzas and even an Australian T-bone. There are also Thai and Lao dishes tamed to Western palates. Two shell cartridges mark the entrance so you can't miss it. You can also exchange money here and book bus and air tickets.

Entertainment

Maniyore Pub on the main street serves as a dimly lit nightclub and drinking den. It's well-patronised by locals and backpackers and can be quite busy on weekends.

Shopping

The fresh market behind the post office stocks exotic fruits you won't typically see elsewhere in Laos, such as Chinese pear. Other local delicacies include *nok qen dawng* (swallows stored whole in jars until they ferment), and *hét wái*, which grow wild around Xieng Khuang and fetch high prices in Japan.

West of the main strip, the **chinese market** (🍽️ 8am-6pm) is over two storeys tall and sells plenty of plastic tack and souvenirs, although you can also get some decent gold and silver.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lao Airlines (☎ 212027), located next to the Lao Development Bank, flies to/from Vientiane (one way/return US\$53/101, daily except Tuesday and Thursday) and to/from Luang Prabang (one way/return US\$40/77, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday).

BUS

Most buses now leave from the new bus station, which is about 4km west of town. The relocation from the old bus station has been slow, but there's a good chance that everything will have moved by the time you read this.

Most long-distance buses depart between 7.30am and 8am.

Sam Neua

Daily buses run between Phonsavan and Sam Neua (US\$7, eight to 10 hours, two daily) along Rte 7 and Rte 6.

Vientiane & Luang Prabang

Buses head daily to Vientiane (ordinary, US\$9, 11 hours, 9.30am and 4pm; VIP, US\$10, 11 hours, 7.30am), Vang Vieng (ordinary, US\$7.50, six hours, 7.15am; VIP US\$10, six hours, 7.30am) and Luang Prabang (ordinary, US\$8.50, 10 hours, 8.30am; VIP, US\$9.50, 10 hours, 8.30am).

Paksan

Phonsavan is linked with Paksan in Bolikham-sai Province by a road in deplorable condition – especially south of Tha Thom (102km from Phonsavan). There is, however, a daily bus to Paksan (US\$8, 8am).

Within Xieng Khuang Province & to Vietnam

There are public buses and *sáwngháew* to Muang Kham (US\$2, two hours, four daily), Muang Sui (US\$2, one hour, three daily) and Nong Haet (US\$2, four hours, four daily).

Other destinations include Lat Khai (Plain of Jars site 3; US\$1, 30 minutes, one daily) and Muang Khoun (US\$2, 30 minutes, six daily).

Buses also go all the way through to Vinh in Vietnam (US\$11, 11 hours, 6.30am Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday).

Getting Around

Jumbos are the main form of public transport in town. The price anywhere within a 3km radius is US\$0.50 to US\$1 per person. A ride to the airport will cost US\$1.50 per person.

Cars and 4WDs can also be hired through the guide services at Sousath Travel at the Maly Hotel or through just about any guesthouse or hotel for jaunts outside of town.

You could easily visit all three Plain of Jars sites by bike or motorcycle. Guesthouses can help you find motorcycle hire (per day

US\$15), and Craters Bar & Restaurant (see opposite) has two bicycles for rent (US\$3 per day).

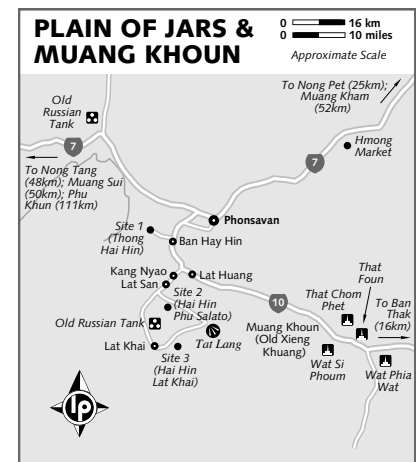
PLAIN OF JARS

ຫ້ງໄຫຫ້ນ

The Plain of Jars is a large area extending around Phonsavan from the southwest to the northeast, where huge jars of unknown origin are scattered about in over a dozen groupings. Despite local myth (see the Plain of Jars boxed text, p170), the jars have been fashioned from solid stone, most from a tertiary conglomerate known as molasse (akin to sandstone), and a few from granite. 'Quarries' (actually boulder fields) west of Muang Sui have been discovered containing half-finished jars. Apparently the jars were carved from solid boulders of varying sizes, which goes a long way to explain the many different sizes and shapes.

Many of the smaller jars have been taken away by various collectors, but there are still several hundred or so on the plain in the five major sites (out of the 20 or so known to exist) that are worth visiting.

Site 1 (Thong Hai Hin; admission US\$0.70), the biggest and most accessible site, is 15km southwest of Phonsavan and features 250 jars, most weighing 600kg to one tonne each. The largest jar weighs as much as six tonnes and is said to have been the victory cup of mythical King Jeum and so is called Hai Jeum. The site has two pavilions and



A POTTED HISTORY

Among the most enigmatic sights in Laos are several meadowlike areas close to Phonsavan littered with large stone jars. Quite a few theories have been advanced as to the functions of the jars – that they were used as sarcophagi, or as wine fermenters, or for rice storage – but there is no evidence confirming one theory over the other. Lying around are the stone lids for a few of the jars. White quartzite rocks have also been found lying next to some of the jars, along with vases that may have contained human remains.

Madeleine Colani, a noted French archaeologist who spent three years studying the Plain of Jars in the 1930s, found a human-shaped bronze figure in one of the jars at Site 1, as well as tiny stone beads. The current whereabouts of these cultural artefacts and other Colani discoveries – photographs of which exist in her 1935 *Megalithes du Haut Laos (Megaliths of Highland Laos)* – are unknown. You can see the relief of a human figure carved onto jar No 217 at Site 1 – a feature Colani missed. Aerial photographic evidence suggests that a thin ‘track’ of jars may link the various jar sites in Xieng Khuang.

The jars are commonly said to be 2000 years old, but in the absence of any organic material associated with the jars – eg bones or food remains – there is no reliable way to date them. The jars may be associated with the equally mysterious stone megaliths (‘menhirs’ in Colani’s words) found off Rte 6 on the way north to Sam Neua, and/or with large Dongson drum-shaped stone objects discovered in Luang Prabang Province. Archaeological investigation has been slowed by years of war and by the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO).

Meanwhile, local legend says that in the 6th century a cruel chieftain named Chao Angka ruled the area as part of Muang Pakan. Sensitive to the plight of Pakan villagers, the Tai-Lao hero Khun Jeum supposedly came down from southern China and deposed Angka. To celebrate his victory, Khun Jeum had the jars constructed for the fermentation of rice wine. According to this version, the jars were cast from a type of cement that was made from buffalo skin, sand, water and sugar cane, and fired in a nearby cave kiln. A limestone cave on the Plain of Jars that has smoke holes in the top is said to have been this kiln (the Pathet Lao used this same cave as a shelter during the war).

restrooms that were built for a visit by Thailand’s crown prince.

Two other jar sites are readily accessible by road from Phonsavan. **Site 2** (Hai Hin Phu Salato; admission US\$0.70), about 25km south of town, features 90 jars spread out across two adjacent hillsides. Vehicles can reach the base of the hills, so it’s only a short if steep walk to the jars.

More impressive is 150-jar **Site 3** (Hai Hin Lat Khai; admission US\$0.70). It’s about 10km south of Site 2 (or 35km from Phonsavan) on a scenic hill-top near Lat Khai, southeast of Phonsavan. Ban Xieng Di contains a small monastery where the remains of Buddha images that were damaged in the war have been displayed. The villagers, who live in unusually large houses compared with those of the average lowland Lao, grow rice, sugar cane, avocado and banana. Villagers can lead you on a short hike to a local waterfall called **Tat Lang** (admission US\$0.50). To reach the jar site you must hike around 2km along rice paddy dykes and up the hill.

Many smaller sites can also be seen in Muang Kham district, but none of them contain more than 40 or so jars. Only Sites 1, 2 and 3 are considered to be reasonably free of UXO. Even at these sites you should take care to stay within the jar areas and stick to worn footpaths.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to see the jars is on a tour from Phonsavan – see p165. Options include hiring a jeep and driver, which costs US\$14 per person for four passengers, or taking a minivan tour, which costs US\$10 to US\$12 for eight passengers. These tours generally include the three main sites, the wreck of a Russian tank which was bombed during the war, and a pit stop for *lào-lào* at a village. Optional extras for a higher price include Viet Cong bunkers and Muang Khoun.

You can also visit the sites independently by bicycle or motorcycle; see p169. Alternatively, charter a jumbo from Phonsavan

to Site 1, 15km from the Phonsavan market, for US\$5 return including waiting time, for up to six people. For Sites 2 and 3 your best bet is to arrange a 4WD and driver through one of the guesthouses or hotels. There is a bus from Phonsavan to Site 3 (Hai Hin Lat Khai; US\$1, 30 minutes, one daily).

PHONSAVAN TO NONG HAET

Rte 7 heads east from Phonsavan to north Vietnam via Muang Kham and Nong Haet (see Map p166).

About 30km east of Phonsavan en route to Muang Kham (northern side of the road) is **Nong Pet**, a Hmong village with a picturesque spring surrounded by rice fields; it’s said to be the source of the Nam Ngum. A sizable **Hmong market** (ໂພງ 7am-7pm Sun) is held here every Sunday. Between Muang Kham and Nong Haet you may notice Thai Dam funerary shrines along the way – large white tombs with prayer flags, offerings of food and a pile of the departed’s worldly possessions.

Muang Kham is little more than a rustic high-way trading post, but there are several jar sites in the vicinity. Further east along Rte 7, 119km from Phonsavan, is the market town of **Nong Haet**, situated only 13km short of the Vietnamese border.

See p169 for information on bus and *sǎwngthǎew* to this area.

Mineral Springs

ບ້ານຈີ້ຮອນ

Two hot mineral springs can be visited near Muang Kham. **Baw Nyai** (admission US\$0.50; ໂພງ 9am-7pm) is the larger of the two and lies 18km east of Muang Kham, 51km from Phonsavan. The spring source is in a heavily wooded area where several bamboo pipes have been rigged so that you can bathe nearby, although the experience is a little disappointing owing to the muddy texture of the water. A much nicer way to experience the spring water is to overnight here at the very comfortable bungalows of **Nam Horn Resort** (US\$10). These timber structures with mosquito nets and fans have lovely baths which you can fill with spring water. Alternatively **Sonebot Guest House** (US\$10) has more modern rooms, but again, baths you can fill with spring water.

Baw Noi (Little Spring) feeds into a stream just a few hundred metres off Rte 7, a couple of kilometres before Baw Nyai on the way

from Muang Kham. You can sit in the stream where the hot spring water mixes with the cool stream water and ‘adjust’ the temperature by moving from one area to another.

The easiest way to get to the springs is by hiring a *sǎwngthǎew* or tuk-tuk from Muang Kham for around US\$5.

Tham Piu

ຖໍ້ພິວ

At this cave near the former village of Ban Na Meun, an estimated 200 to 400 people were killed when a fighter plane fired a single rocket into the cave during the Second Indochina War. A plaque identifies the date as 24 November 1968, but other accounts claim the incident occurred in December 1969. The floor of the large cave, in the side of a limestone cliff, is littered with rubble from the partial cave-in caused by the rocket, as well as with minor debris left from the two-storey shelter built into the cave. Government propaganda says many of those who died in the bombing were Lao women and children, but another version of events says that it was a makeshift Vietnamese hospital where troop casualties were treated. Adding credence to the latter story is the fact that Vietnamese officials visited the cave in the 1980s, removed virtually all of the human remains and artefacts, and took them back to Vietnam.

Although Tham Piu is certainly a moving sight, the journey to the cave is the main attraction, since it passes several Hmong and Thai Dam villages and involves a bit of hiking in the forest. From the cave mouth is a view of the forest and the plains below. A stream and small irrigation dam at the base of the cliff is picturesque. Another cave known as **Tham Piu Song** (Tham Piu 2) can be found a little higher up on the same cliff. This one has a small entrance that opens up into a large cavern; since it wasn’t bombed, the cave formations can be seen in their original state. Don’t forget your torch (flashlight).

Tham Piu is just a few kilometres east of Muang Kham off Rte 7.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

You can hire a 4WD and driver in Phonsavan for around US\$30 a day for trips to Tham Piu and back.

To get to Tham Piu by public transport, you’d have to take a Nong Haet bus and ask to be let out at the turn-off for Tham Piu. From the turn-off, walk towards the limestone

CROSSING THE VIETNAMESE BORDER AT NAM KHAN & NAM CAN

The Nam Khan–Nam Can crossing became an official international border crossing in 2003, but so far few people aside from Lao and Vietnamese seem to use it. Coming up to Nam Can (200km north of Vinh) from the Vietnamese side is quite a journey, with winding mountain roads as you approach the lip of the Plain of Jars. After exiting Vietnam, you'll enter Laos at Nam Khan, 13km east of Nong Haet via Rte 7. Tourist visas are available on arrival for US\$30. From Nong Haet you can reach Phonsavan by bus (US\$2, three to four hours, four daily). Between bus departures you may be able to charter a private car for between US\$30 and US\$40.

It's also possible to catch a bus directly between Phonsavan and Vinh in Vietnam (US\$11, 11 hours, Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday), with an immigration pit stop at the border.

cliff north of the road until you're within a kilometre of the cliff. At this point you have to plunge into the woods and follow a honeycomb of trails to the bottom of the cliff and then mount a steep, narrow trail that leads up to the mouth of the cave. It would be best to ask for directions from villagers along the way or you're liable to get lost; live ordnance is another danger. Better still, find someone in Phonsavan who knows the way and invite them to come along for the hike.

MUANG KHOUN (OLD XIENG KHUANG)

ຊຸງຂວາງເກົ່າ(ເມືອງຄູນ)

pop 14,000

Muang Khoun's ancient capital was so heavily bombarded during the Second Indochina War (and ravaged in the 19th century by Chinese and Vietnamese invaders) that it was almost completely abandoned by 1975. More than 20 years after war's end the old capital is once again flourishing. Officially the town has been renamed Muang Khoun. Many of the residents are Thai Phuan, Thai Dam or Thai Neua, along with a smattering of lowland Lao and Vietnamese.

Only one French colonial building still stands: the former commissariat, now used as a social centre. The former palace of a Thai Phuan prince is in ruins. For the most part the town consists of nondescript wooden buildings with corrugated roofs, although outside of town you'll also see original Phuan-style stilted longhouses made of thick timber.

Several Buddhist temples built between the 16th and 19th centuries lie in ruins. The foundation and columns of **Wat Phia Wat** are still standing at the east end of town, along with a large seated Buddha. Sadly, the only intact Xieng Khuang-style temples left in Laos today – characterised by striking pentagonal silhouettes when viewed from the

front – are in Luang Prabang. More modern **Wat Si Phoum** is the town's most active Buddhist temple.

That Foun (also called That Chomsi), a tall 25m to 30m *jehdii* (Buddhist stupa) constructed in the Lan Xang/Lanna style, towers over the town. You can climb right through the foliage-covered stupa via a large cavity that Chinese Ho marauders tunnelled into the brick stupa over century ago to loot valuable Buddha images enshrined in the dome. Take a glance upwards once you're inside, and you can see the perfectly formed outline of a smaller, much older stupa that was 'entombed' by the larger one. From here you can also see historic **That Chom Phet** (reputedly built by the Cham) standing atop a nearby hill.

Ban Na Si, near Wat Phia Wat, is a sizable Thai Dam village. Around 16km further east along Rte 7B, the Thai Phuan village of **Ban Thak** is worth a visit to see its terraced rice fields and stately Phuan-style homes.

There are no sleeping options in Muang Khoun, and it's best visited as a day trip from Phonsavan. Opposite the market in the centre of town there is a row of noodle shops with basic Lao fare.

Shopping

If you ask around you may be able to buy Thai tribal textiles (especially Phuan, Thai Dam or Thai Neua) in town, although forget about buying antique Xieng Khuang styles – these were picked over long ago by collectors from Vientiane and abroad.

Getting There & Away

Several buses a day travel to/from Phonsavan (US\$2, 30 minutes, six daily) from the market in the centre of town.

(Continued on page 181)

(Continued from page 172)

MUANG SUI

ເມືອງສູ້ຍ

pop 20,200

Once a city of antique Buddhist temples and quaint provincial architecture, Muang Sui became the headquarters of the Neutralist faction and 'Lima Site 108' (a landing site used by US planes) during the Second Indochina War. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) totally razed Muang Sui late in the war after running the Royal Lao Army out of Xieng Khuang Province.

Like Muang Khoun (Old Xieng Khuang), the town is still rebuilding and is part of a new district called Muang Phu Kut. On some government maps the town is labelled Ban Nong Tang.

Visiting Muang Sui is best done as a day trip from Phonsavan.

Sights

Although the devastation wrought upon Muang Sui by the NVA seriously damaged every temple in the district, the ruins of several older temples can be seen. **Wat Ban Phong**, which still has resident monks, once contained a beautiful bronze Xieng Khuang-style Buddha called Pha Ong, said to hail from the 14th century. Lao communists reportedly transferred the image to Sam Neua in Hua Phan Province, although no one there seems to know anything about it.

Towards the eastern end of the district, a large picturesque natural lake called **Nong Tang**, flanked by high limestone cliffs, is a favourite local picnicking site. Five caves in the cliffs to the northeast of the lake can easily be visited by following posted signs, or you may be able to hire a local guide from one

THE LAST OF THE HMONG RESISTANCE

In the mountains of Xieng Khuang Province, pockets of Hmong resistance lived on nearly 30 years after the US defeat in Laos. These rebels reportedly financed their survival and armaments through the sale of agarwood (*māi kitsanda* in Lao, less commonly known as 'eaglewood' in English), a highly aromatic wood that fetches high prices in Arab countries where it's used for incense.

In early 2003 around 700 Hmong rebels in Xieng Khuang Province and neighbouring Luang Prabang Province surrendered to Lao authorities and were resettled in more populated areas of these provinces. Further surrenders of 170 in 2005 and more than 400 (mostly children) in 2006 have reduced the remaining rebels to just a handful. Poor living conditions have been the main impetus for surrender, although fear of persecution and human rights abuse has kept many in deplorable states of existence for decades.

of the noodle stalls near the lake. Also near the lake is a semiruined 15th-century Xieng Khuang-style stupa called **That Banmang**.

Further afield are two more limestone caves that are well worth visiting. **Tham Pha** is a large network of caverns in which hundreds of small Buddha figures were stashed away to protect them from Haw invasions a couple of centuries ago. In the main entry cavern stands a very large sitting Buddha. The cave continues deep into the hillside, with ample passageways linking one cavern with another. The NVA reportedly used the cave as a hospital during the Second Indochina War. The local Lao have rigged electric lights in Tham Pha so that visitors can easily tour most of the accessible caverns, and will turn them on for a small donation. Near there is a second large cave, **Tham That**, which contains an old stupa ruin.

In the same general vicinity, but less accessible, is a **coffin cave** high up in a limestone cliff. To reach this one you'll have to do a little rock climbing and a lot of boulder scrambling. Inside the relatively small cave are the remains of large prehistoric wooden coffins, carved from single tree trunks. They've all already been opened and raided, but human skeletal remains and potsherds are still spread over the cave floor.

Around 32km east of Muang Sui, south of Rte 7, is a **boulder field** where you can see half-carved stone jars like those from the famous jar sites near Phonsavan.

Keep in mind that there are still a lot of UXO around Muang Sui. It's best to visit the area around Tham Pha, Tham That and the coffin cave with a guide who knows the terrain. Travel agents in Phonsavan (p165) can provide a 4WD vehicle (necessary to reach the coffin cave), driver and guide for up to

WAR JUNK

War scraps have become an important part of the local architecture and economy in Xieng Khuang. Torpedo-shaped bomb casings are collected, stored, refashioned into items of everyday use or sold as scrap metal. Among the most valuable are the 1.5m-long casings from US-made cluster bomb units (CBUs), which split lengthways when released and scattered 600 to 700 tennis-ball-size bomblets (each containing around 250 steel pellets) over 5000-sq-metre areas.

Turned on its side, a CBU casing becomes a pot for plants; upright the casings are used as fence posts or as substitutes for the traditional wooden stilts used to support rice barns and thatched houses. Hundreds of casings like this can be seen in Xieng Khuang villages along Rte 7, which stretches northeast all the way from Phonsavan to Hanoi, or in villages in the vicinity of the old capital. Aluminium spoons sold in local markets are said to be fashioned from the remains of downed American aircraft.

Farmers from around the province keep piles of French, Russian, Chinese and American war junk – including Soviet tanks and pieces of US planes shot down during the war – beneath their stilt houses or in unused corners of their fields. They use bits and pieces as needed around the farm or sell pieces to itinerant scrap dealers who drive their trucks from village to village. These trucks bring the scrap to warehouses in Phonsavan, where it is sold to larger dealers from Vientiane. Eventually the scrap is melted down in Vientiane or across the Mekong River in Thailand as a source of cheap metal.

In Laos it is illegal to trade in leftover war weaponry – bombs, bullets, arms – of any kind. According to National Law Chapters 71 and 72, the illegal purchase, sale, or theft of these can result in a prison term of between six months and five years.

four people for an all-day journey to sites around Muang Sui, for US\$80.

Getting There & Away

Rte 7 to Muang Sui from Phonsavan is in good condition and it takes less than an hour to drive the 52km distance. Buses leave Phonsavan (US\$0.70, two daily) at approximately 7am and 1pm.

HUA PHAN PROVINCE

Steeped in florid beauty, and separated from surrounding provinces by long, bumpy bus rides, Hua Phan in Laos' emerald northeast retains a great degree of mystique. It's so far from Laos' tourist trail that the few travellers who do explore the region generally come in from Vietnam. But for anyone with a yen for the unspoilt it's a must. It's so mountainous that as the roads descend south from Sam Neua, the provincial capital, they curl down into seas of cloud trapped in cleaved valleys. The most inspiring time to visit is after the rains from April to October, when the bucolic *bâan* (villages) and their vast rice fields are lush.

For much of the last 500 years Hua Phan has been either an independent Thai Neua

kingdom or part of an Annamese vassal state known as Ai Lao. It only became a Lao entity under French colonial rule, and the French commissariat at Sam Neua gave the Thai Neua chiefs and village headmen a great deal of autonomy. By the end of the Second Indochina War, all traces of the French presence had been erased.

A fifth of the province's modest population live in Sam Neua ('Northern Sam', a reference to its position towards the northern end of the Nam Sam). Twenty-two ethnic groups make the province their home, predominantly Thai Khao, Thai Daeng, Thai Meuay, Thai Neua, Phu Noi, Hmong, Khamu, Yunnanese and Vietnamese. The Vietnamese influence is very strong here as Sam Neua is closer to (and more accessible from) Hanoi than Vientiane.

As a tourist attraction, the province's main claim to fame is that Vieng Xai served as the headquarters for the Pathet Lao throughout most of the war years. But the small tourist industry here is finding its feet and planting them firmly in community-based adventures. Textiles in the 'Sam Neua' style – of tribal Thai origins – are another drawcard. The best textiles are said to come from the areas around Muang Son and Sop Hao.

SAM NEUA (XAM NEUA)

ນະຄົນເໜືອ(ສຳເໜືອ)

☎ 064 / pop 46,800

Tucked away in a narrow valley formed by the Nam Sam at about 1200m above sea level, Sam Neua remains one of the country's least visited provincial capitals. Swimming in the milieu of history, eye-widening produce markets (and less appealing Chinese goods) and ethnic diversity, it possesses the tang ardently sought by inquisitive travellers. The town and its surrounds shift through great contrasts of climate and colour. From April to October the landscape is lush and warm from the rains. As the cooler dry sets in, flowers speckle the streets until the wet begin again in December. Sam Neua makes an excellent base to explore the rest of the province, which is slowly but surely opening up. Residents are mostly Lao, Vietnamese and Hmong, along with some Thai Dam, Thai Daeng and Thai Lü.

Information

Internet Shop (per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 4-9pm Mon-Fri)

Operates out of a private house in the evenings only.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 312171) Exchanges Thai baht or US dollars at the same rate as in Vientiane.

Lao Telecom (☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) IDD phone service available.

Post office Opposite the bus terminal.

Provincial Tourist Office (☎ 312567; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri) An excellent tourist office with English-speaking staff eager to help with information.

Sights

Sam Neua boasts one of the most colourful **markets** in the region. Products from China and Vietnam line up beside fresh produce and domestic goods. Sam Neua-style textiles can be found inside the main market building; prices can be very good, although quality is generally not up to the standard of markets in Vientiane. Local Hmong, Thai Dam, Thai Daeng and Thai Lü frequent this market. Connoisseurs agree that the Thai Daeng weave the most attractive textiles. Along with textiles you'll find field rats (live or skinned), banana leaves stuffed with squirming insects, and forks and spoons made with aluminium salvaged from war debris.

A 1978 **independence monument** mounted by a red star sits on a hill at the northwest edge of town; it's an easy climb, worthwhile for the modest view from the top. From this hill you can continue walking on to **Wat PhoKaysanalam**, about 2km from the market. The only monastery in town, with just five monks in residence (the minimum needed for holding the monastic ordination ceremonies), the wat features a small *sim* that was destroyed during

SAMANA (RE-EDUCATION CAMPS)

Hua Phan is infamous for the *samana* (re-education camps) established around the eastern half of the province immediately following the 1975 Revolution. Inspired by Vietnamese examples (several in Hua Phan were actually designed and constructed by Vietnamese architects and labourers), these camps mixed forced labour with political indoctrination to 'rehabilitate' thousands of civil servants from the old regime. Many Royal Lao Government officials were lured to the camps with the promise of a two-week 'job training' session, only to find themselves captives of the Pathet Lao for many years.

Although almost all of the camps were closed by 1989, it is alleged that Re-education Camp No 7 somewhere near Sam Neua still held political prisoners into this century. According to Amnesty International (AI), three political prisoners (all former senior officials in the Lao People's Democratic Republic – PDR – government) were sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment in Hua Phan for peacefully advocating a multiparty political system in 1992. There were no defence lawyers at their trial. All three subsequently became very ill and one of the prisoners, 59-year-old Thongsouk Saysangkhi (former deputy minister of science and technology), died of alleged maltreatment in February 1998. Three more political prisoners received life sentences in 1992 after having been held without trial for 17 years.

The harsh conditions in these camps fell well short of international minimum standards, and prisoners were denied medical treatment, visits and all access to reading or writing material.

Although as many as 30,000 people were thought to have been interned by 1979 – the *samana* numeric peak – the Lao government has never issued a statement either confirming or denying the existence of the camps. It is unknown whether any remain active today.

the war and rebuilt in 1983. The backdrop of misty green hills seems to remove the wat from its urban setting entirely. The two small *thâat* you'll see on the way to the independence monument are the last remnants of local prewar temples.

There are some weaving houses near the wat where you can watch weavers master their craft. You'll need guidance from the Tourist Office to visit, however, mostly because it's rude to just wander in. Sadly the best textiles produced here are shipped directly to Japan and Singapore where they fetch high prices.

Chasing the riverbank north, Sam Neua has its very own **promenade**, which begins at the northern end of the market and follows the Nam Sam for kilometre or so. A walk here reveals backyards and residential vegetable plots. In June and July you'll also see people planting rice, and in November, harvesting. Two suspension bridges join the promenade to the opposite side of the river, so you can continue your exploration further afield.

Sleeping

Phootong Guest House (☎ 312271; r US\$3.50) Simple, cheap and central, this small guesthouse behind a shopfront has basic rooms with ceiling fans and mosquito nets. They're a little bit tired but decent value and the owners are extremely gracious. The attached bathrooms are petite and have cold water only.

Bounhome Guest House (☎ 312223; r US\$4-6) Plenty of sunlight fills the fine little rooms upstairs in this guesthouse. Their neat interiors contain small dressers and firm, low-set beds. They're fan-cooled and clean.

Paeng Pane Guest House (☎ 312006; r US\$5) A short walk from the centre of town, this big, airy structure contains bright rooms with wallpapered floors. The narrow, attached bathrooms have hot water. Open sporadically, there's a simple restaurant next door serving noodle soups (meals US\$0.50 to US\$1).

Shuliyo Guest House (☎ 312462; r US\$5-6) Tucked into an alley near the market, Shuliyo has rudimentary but welcoming rooms with decent bathrooms, hot water, ceiling fans and aged beds. There's a lovely central sitting area with free tea and coffee.

Kheamxam Guest House (☎ 312111; r US\$5-7) This pastel-hued, corner hotel is the best value in town. It offers a range of rooms from neat and simple affairs with spotless, shared bathrooms, to large corner rooms with satel-

lite TV, attached hot-water bathrooms and street views.

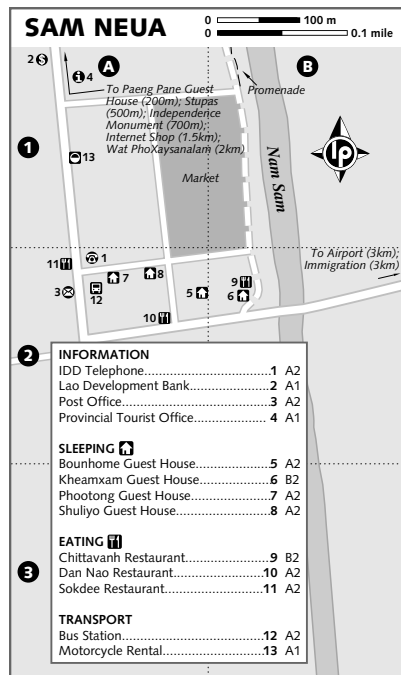
Eating

For cheap *fôe*, samosas, spring rolls and fried sweet potato, the **market** (☎ 6am-6pm) is the place to go.

Dan Nao Restaurant (☎ 314126; meals US\$1-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This neat, petite restaurant has a spotless interior and serves a limited but tasty array of noodles, grilled chicken and beef, and fried dishes with plenty of ginger, chilli and garlic. The menu is in English so there's no guesswork.

Sokdee Restaurant (☎ 312380; meals US\$1-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A good spot for the adventurous gastronome, Sokdee serves authentic Lao food a-la intestine and meats that diverge from chicken, beef and pork. Not ideal for vegetarians, but it's extremely popular with the locals.

Chittavanh Restaurant (meals US\$1.20-2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Extremely popular with local diners, Chittavanh serves fabulous *fôe* as well as good *tôm yâm*, Cantonese stir-fries, and the usual roster of noodle and rice dishes.



The décor is dominated by demure calendar girls, the smells are great and the table condiments will knock your socks off.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lao Airlines (☎ 312023; airport) currently flies between Vientiane and Sam Neua three times a week (one way/return US\$75/143, Monday, Wednesday and Saturday). The airport lies around 3km from the main area of town. A motorcycle taxi from the airport to any lodging in town costs around US\$1, but you'll need to flag one down as they don't hang around waiting for fares. From the market, however, it's easy to hire jumbos or *săwngthăew* to the airport.

BUS

Sam Neua can be reached by road from both Xieng Khuang and Udomxai Provinces. From Phonsavan the journey travels along the good, flat Rte 7 to Muang Kham. From Muang Kham Rte 6 is decent by Lao standards to Nam Noen, a small truck stop near the junction of Rtes 6 and 1 just north of the Hua Phan Province border. Between Nam Noen and Sam Neua it's a steep, winding and rough – but highly scenic – dirt road that passes through numerous Lao, Hmong and Khamu villages.

There are two buses a day from Sam Neua to Phonsavan (US\$7, eight to 10 hours, 9am and noon); the bus then continues on to Vientiane (from Sam Neua US\$13, 20 to 24 hours).

A daily bus heads southwest along Rte 6 and then Rte 1 to Nong Khiaw (US\$7, 12 hours, 8am) in Luang Prabang Province, and continues on to Luang Prabang (from Sam Neua US\$8, 16 hours). Alternatively you can stop at Nong Khiaw and continue to Udomxai. The Nong Khiaw to Nam Noen leg runs along winding roads and brilliant scenery, passing many Blue Hmong villages along the way and an international narcotics control project in the district of Muang Vieng Thong (also known as Muang Hiam).

MOTORCYCLE

You can rent a motorcycle for day trips from a shop between the Provincial Tourist Office and the bus station. The owner doesn't speak English, but you can ask for linguistic

assistance from the Tourist Office. The cost of rental is about US\$6, plus a US\$500 deposit or your passport. All bikes need to be returned to the shop by 6pm.

AROUND SAM NEUA

A dirt road on the right-hand side of Wat Pho Xaysanalam winds its way out of Sam Neua and into surrounding villages. If you follow it for 11km you'll stumble onto the **Ban Tham Buddha cave**. The journey out here is stunning – an anarchy of tumbling landscape interrupted by ordered rice fields and tidy *bâan*. The cave is just before Ban Tham; if you reach the only school in the district you've gone 100m too far.

You can easily walk to Ban Tham but only if you're prepared to walk back. Alternatively you can hire a motorbike, catch the daily *săwngthăew* from Sam Neua (US\$0.50, 40 minutes, noon) in one or both directions, or charter a *săwngthăew* (about US\$12 whether it's one way or return).

A 580-sq-km area of forested hills along the Nam Sam near Sam Thai in the south-eastern section of the province was declared the **Nam Sam National Protected Area** (Nam Sam NPA) in 1993. Nam Sam NPA is thought to be a habitat for wild elephant, various gibbons, gaur, banteng, tiger, clouded leopard, Asiatic black bear and Malayan sun bear. Despite the NPA designation – and even though the area can only be reached by a 4WD track from Vieng Xai – shifting cultivation by hill tribes and cedar logging by Chinese companies threatens the forests.

Sam Tai itself is famous for producing magnificent textiles. If you feel like getting off the beaten track you can head out here on a daily *săwngthăew* from Sam Neua (US\$3.40, six hours, 6.50am) and spend the night at **Syphanh Guest House** (☎ 314449; US\$2) or the more comfortable **Sengkeo Guest House** (☎ 314416; r US\$3-5).

Tat Saloei (also known as Phonesai Waterfall), about 35km south of Sam Neua off the road to Nam Noen, is a waterfall said to be very beautiful just after the rainy season. Reaching a height of 100m, it's a popular picnic spot for locals. To get here catch a *săwngthăew* travelling to Nam Noen and tell the driver where you want to stop. It should cost around US\$1.20.

The road northeast from Sam Neua to Sop Hao on the Vietnamese border passes by several Hmong and Yao villages, which make for fascinating day trips or more. There's a daily *sawnghthäew* from Sam Neua (US\$1.60, two hours, 6.30am). The border at Pahang is open to Vietnamese and Lao citizens only. If you want to extend your stay in the area, there are several guesthouses in Sop Hao, including **Sop Hao Guest House** (☎ 314375; US\$3) and **PhouBao Guest House** (☎ 314387; US\$3). Both have basic rooms with fans, mosquito nets and share bathrooms.

Officials in the area can be very touchy about foreigners owing to speculation that the last of Laos' *samana* camps may still operate here. It's believed that the Royal Family were transported to a *samana* camp near Sop Hao in 1977 in order to prevent them becoming a symbol of resistance against the Pathet Lao. The conditions they faced were harsh and it is alleged that the Crown Prince Say Vong Savang died in May 1978, followed 11 days later by his father King Savang Vatthana from starvation. Queen Khmaboui died in December 1981. Eyewitness have said they were all were buried in unmarked graves outside the camp's perimeter.

Hintang Archaeological Park (Suan Hin)

ສວນຫີນ

This 'stone garden' (*suan hin*), far more interesting than its name makes it sound, is better known locally as Hintang Archaeological Park, although it's also known locally as Sao Hin Tang (Standing Stone Pillars). Often likened to Britain's Stonehenge because of its rough-hewn, 2m stone uprights, Suan Hin is as much of a mystery as the Plain of Jars – indeed they may be historically related. The stone chosen for the megaliths coincides with that used to fashion the jars; beneath some of the pillars are tunnel-like ditches whose purpose is as enigmatic as the pillars and jars themselves – current speculation suggests a funerary function and that these graves are around 2000 years old. The park has been nominated as a World Heritage site.

Large stone discs about a metre in diameter can also be seen lying among the menhirs. Local animist lore says the discs once sat atop the megaliths to form dining and drinking tables for a sky spirit named Jahn Hahn. The meaning of the discs is as lost to the world as that of the pillars.

The pillars are a 5.4km hike off Rte 6 via a road beginning at a point 55km southwest of Sam Neua. This road passes the village of Ban Pakha on the way.

To get here by public transport is a bit of a hassle because once you get off and make the hike, it could be several hours before another bus comes by. However, if you're up for it you can catch the daily *sawnghthäew* from Sam Neua to Nam Noen and get off at Ban Pao (also known as Ban Natok, US\$1.70, 2½ hours, 6.20am). From here it's a 6km walk to the park, which is signposted.

Alternatively you can inquire at the Tourist Office in Sam Neua about hiring transport out to Suan Hin – a private *sawnghthäew* should cost around US\$45 for the day. Sousath Travel (p165) in Phonsavan can also provide transport and guidance to Suan Hin.

SAM NEUA TO VIENG XAI

Whether or not you visit the famous Pathet Lao caves, Vieng Xai district is worth wandering about for its scenic beauty. Between Kms 11 and 12, coming from Sam Neua, is a fairly big Hmong Lai (Striped Hmong) village called **Ban Hua Khang**. After Km 13 you'll start seeing karst formations, many with cave entrances, along with pretty little valleys terraced in rice. At Km 20 there is an intersection; the right fork reaches Vieng Xai after 9km, then continues to Na Maew on the Vietnamese border (87km from Sam Neua), while the other road goes to Sop Hao.

Six kilometres before the Vieng Xai turn-off, coming from Sam Neua, is the 80m-high **Tat Nam Neua**. You can walk to the top of the falls straight from a bridge where the road crosses the Nam Neua just after the road forks towards Vieng Xai. For an all-in-one view from the bottom, take the left fork and proceed for 2km until you see some terraced rice fields on the right-hand side of the road. A trail winds for 1km or so through the fields, along and across a stream and through bamboo thickets before reaching the bottom. You may have to ask locally for directions as the trail isn't particularly obvious. Be sure to apply insect repellent to your feet and ankles in order to keep leeches at bay. As you'd expect, the falls are most beautiful just after the rainy season, when you can swim in the lower pools.

VIENG XAI

ວຽງໄຊ

☎ 064 / pop 32,800

The former Pathet Lao (PL) revolutionary headquarters of Vieng Xai sit in a striking valley of fertile hills and limestone cliffs riddled with caves, several of which were used to shelter PL officers during the Second Indochina War. The town is famous for the caves in which the stoic officers and some 23,000 people found shelter, but Vieng Xai itself is unbearably pretty. Manmade lakes spot the landscape and wildflowers explode in crimson and yellow to join the emerald and karst backdrop. The beauty of the terrain somehow underscores the decimation it suffered during the American bombing campaign.

Caves

According to the guides, there are approximately 400 caves in the district, 100 near Vieng Xai, and around a dozen with war history. Only a few years ago local authorities treated them as if they were a military secret, even while the National Tourist Authority of Laos (NTAL) in Vientiane promoted the caves as tourist attractions. Today, six of the caves are open to the public as revolutionary memorials and tourist attractions. Inside are former meeting rooms, government offices, markets, temples, printing presses, hospitals, army barracks and more.

The setting of the caves – inside a narrow and precipitous limestone-walled valley – is quite impressive. The PL leadership first started using them in 1964 because the caverns are virtually unassailable by land or air. Today the caves considered the most historically important are named after the figures who once occupied them. Their respective residences now stand defiantly, surrounded by vivid gardens, and some of the houses are used as holiday homes. The caves are within easy walking distance of town.

High in the side of a limestone cliff, **Tham Than Souphanouvong** (called Tham Pha Bong before the war) was deemed fit for royalty, and housed Prince Souphanouvong, the so-called 'Red Prince', who was allegedly killed by Hmong guerrillas at the age of 28, just 4km away. There is a memorial stupa for the Prince on site. Wooden walls and floors, as well as natural cave formations, divided the cavern into bedrooms, meeting rooms, artillery and weapons storage areas and various

other spaces. Souphanouvong eventually built a house in front of the cave entrance and today the house is treated with the same mix of fear and respect as the cave.

Tham Than Kaysone, the office and residence of the PL chief – who served as prime minister and president from 1975 until his death in 1992 – extends 140m into a cliff that was scaled by rope before steps were added. A bust of Kaysone sits inside the entry, and images of Lenin and Che Guevara – gifts from Russia and Cuba – adorn the political party centre. The cave's other rooms include a reception room, bedroom, recreation room, meeting room, library, and an emergency room containing an oxygen generator in case gas was ever dropped in the area (it wasn't). Meals were prepared in the kitchen here with gas donated by Russia, and local villagers provided the food. The rear of the cave opens onto a clearing that was used as an outdoor meeting place and kitchen. Kaysone's handsome two-storey house sits out the front.

Tham Than Khamtay, named after the current president Khamtay Siphandone, is an artificial cave dug out of a limestone cliff, similarly divided into various rooms, with a Franco-Chinese-style house in front of it. Frangipani trees fill the landscaped garden. Below the artificial cave is a natural cave that was used as barracks for up to 300 soldiers (some estimates are higher). This site is also home to the 'Theatre Cave', where visiting artists from Russia, China and Vietnam performed during the war. It was also used for weddings and the occasional volleyball match between soldiers.

Tham Than Nouhak, named for Nouhak Phoumsavang, who served as Lao PDR president from 1992 to 1998, is the most recent to open to the public. Like his PL comrades, Nouhak had a house built for himself in front of the cave.

One of the deepest caves (200m) is **Tham Xieng Muang**, which was used for hospital facilities. Other caves housed weaving mills, printing presses and other facilities needed by the PL to remain self-sufficient.

VISITING THE CAVES

Before entering any of the caves, visitors must report to the **Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Cave Tour Office** (tour US\$3, video camera US\$1, still camera US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-11.30am & 1-4.30pm) to pay the

CROSSING THE VIETNAMESE BORDER AT NAM XOÏ & NAMEO

The border crossing between Nam Xoï in Hua Phan Province, Laos and Nameo in Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam has been open to foreigners for several years, but is used sparingly owing to the difficulty of the terrain on the Vietnamese side.

Travelling to Nam Xoï from within Laos, there's a daily *sǎwngthǎew* from Sam Neua (US\$2.30, four hours, 6.30am), or several from Vieng Xai (US\$1.50, two hours, 8am to 11am). The border is open from 7.30am to 11.30am and 1.30pm to 4.30pm. If you're arriving in Laos from Vietnam, the above *sǎwngthǎew* return to their respective destinations about half an hour after arriving at the border.

Regardless of which direction you're travelling in, you must have organised a visa beforehand; there was no visa on arrival available at the time of writing. This may change so check ahead. It's also likely that you'll need to pay an additional US\$1 fee when you pass through Lao immigration from Vietnam (but not the other way round).

In Vietnam you can negotiate a motorbike to Thanh Hoa or to Ba Thuoc. Both options can be pricey and are unfortunately monopolised by unscrupulous drivers. If you get stuck at the border there are a couple of guesthouses on the Vietnamese side where you can bed down for US\$5 to US\$8. If you get stuck in Nam Xoï the immigration officials may help you arrange a room with a local family.

necessary fees. Guided tours are mandatory and are conducted by guides from the office at 9am and 1pm. They take in three to four caves, and last for about two hours. Two of the guides speak English, and one was a resident of the caves for a short while during the war. If you want to see the caves outside of these official tour times you will need to pay an additional fee of US\$5 per tour to cover staff costs.

Sleeping & Eating

Naxay Guest House (☎ 020-5665026; r US\$2-4) Rooms here are housed in a separate structure at the back of a green property. There are five cute twins with mosquito nets that share a homely living room. Rudimentary bathrooms are out the back, although there's also a private bungalow with its own bathroom attached.

Kamnome Guest House (☎ 020-5712392; r US\$2.50-3) This simple guesthouse has seven basic rooms with small, scoop-water bathrooms and squat toilets. Rooms have mosquito nets and there's a small restaurant on site serving simple fare (meals US\$1 to US\$2) that's open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Thavisay Hotel (☎ 020-5712392; r US\$4-6) Currently being renovated, this two-storey hotel promises to be the best place to stay in town. All rooms have private hot-water bathrooms and two double beds with mosquito nets. It's simple but the setting is lovely and the owners are very friendly. There's also a restaurant (meals US\$2 to US\$3), open breakfast, lunch and dinner, overlooking a man-made lake.

The menu is fairly generic (fried rice etc), but the food is hot and tasty and there are a handful of huts for secluded dinners.

Xailam Guest House (r US\$4-6) This large timber guesthouse sits on stilts overlooking a small lake. Most of the eight rooms have cold-water showers, large TVs, fans and mosquito nets. Although they have shared bathrooms, the cheaper rooms are actually larger and more airy.

Several *fôe* shops in the market serve rice and noodle dishes.

Getting There & Away

Sǎwngthǎew run regularly between Sam Neua and Vieng Xai (US\$0.80, 50 minutes, 29km, 6.20am to 5.20pm), with departures more frequent in the morning.

The Provincial Tourist Office (p183) in Sam Neua can arrange half-day tours to Vieng Xai for US\$35 per group. You could also charter a pick-up truck to take you and up to eight other passengers from Sam Neua to Vieng Xai and back for about US\$20, for a half day.

NAM NOEN

ນາມໂນເນນ

Anyone travelling by road between Nong Khiaw and Phonsavan or between Sam Neua and Phonsavan will pass through this settlement, 7km south of the junction of Rtes 6 and 1. Once upon a time you needed to overnight here, but direct buses have negated the need. As a destination it doesn't have much to offer, but if you find yourself here for a night you

can stay at **Nam Noen Guest House** (dm US\$2), which offers beds with mosquito nets in dormlike rooms, while **Nang Lam Phon** (meals US\$0.50-1.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) provides sticky rice and instant noodles. There are a couple of other noodle shops as well.

There's a daily *sǎwngthǎew* to/from Sam Neua (US\$2.30, 3½ hours, 6.20am) and one or two daily to Nong Khiaw (US\$6, six hours). If you're looking to leave Nam Noen your best bet is in the morning.

NAM NOEN TO NONG KHIAW

Rte 1 between Nong Khiaw and Nam Noen passes through stretches of beautiful scenery with lots of green mountains – even in the dry months when everywhere looks brown – rivers, fern-covered cliffs and villages of Striped and Blue Hmong. The districts of **Muang Vieng Kham** and **Muang Vieng Thong** are populated with Blue Hmong and other ethnicities. Vieng Kham, about 50km east of Muang Ngoi, is a fairly substantial village with a couple of wats and a couple of places to eat. **Ban Wang Wai**, the next town west after Vieng Kham, is more prosperous than many others along the road and a little bigger than Vieng Kham itself. Besides Hmong, you'll see plenty of lowland Lao here, many of whom keep looms beneath their stilted houses.

Hugging 1465 sq km of forest in the north of Hua Phan and Luang Prabang Provinces is the **Nam Et/Phu Loei National Protected Area**. Species in the park are thought to include clouded leopard and tiger. To date there are no organised tours or guides to access the park. However if you stop in Vieng Thong (below) you can pop into the **Wildlife Conservation Society Office** and ask them about their tiger monitoring work and other developments in the park.

Muang Vieng Thong

ມັງງູນທອງ

More than a few travellers who have found themselves stuck in Muang Vieng Thong – also known by its pre-1975 name of Muang Hiam – have opted to stay an extra night or two. This village, inhabited by a collection of hill tribes (particularly Hmong) and lowland Lao, has a very pleasant mountain setting alongside the Nam Khao.

A **hot spring**, roughly 1km north of town on the road to Ban San Tai, makes an excellent bathing alternative in the cold season.

Further down the same road you'll find a few Lao Soung villages between the Nam Et and Phu Loei NPAs.

The road ends after 64km at **Ban San Tai** (San Teu in local dialect), a village that brings together lowland Lao, Thai tribals and Hmong-Mien groups. Several *sǎwngthǎew* ply this route daily from Vieng Thong.

Souksavan Guest House (☎ 314478; r US\$2-3) and **Dok Champa Guest House** (☎ 314469; r US\$3-4) both have rooms with fans, mosquito nets and attached bathrooms.

Several modest, friendly restaurants in the centre of the village offer basic Lao fare.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A daily *sǎwngthǎew* travels to Vieng Thong from Sam Neua (US\$3.10, six hours, 6.30am), returning in the afternoon. *Sǎwngthǎew* also ply between here and Nong Khiaw (US\$2.60, three hours, four daily) and buses pass through from Luang Prabang (US\$4, seven hours, one daily). You will also see buses and trucks that originated elsewhere passing through Vieng Thong, and can flag these down anywhere on the road.

UDOMXAI PROVINCE

This rugged province is wedged between Luang Prabang to the east, Phongsali to the northeast, Luang Nam Tha to the northwest and Sainyabuli to the south, with a small northern section that shares a border with China's Yunnan Province. Most of the provincial population of 265,000 is a mixture of some 23 ethnic minorities, mostly Hmong, Akha, Mien, Phu Thai, Thai Dam, Thai Khao, Thai Lü, Thai Neua, Phuan, Khamu, Lamet, Lao Huay and Yunnanese Chinese (Haw).

The Yunnanese presence continues to intensify with the influx of Chinese skilled labourers working in construction and cash crops, as well as traders from Kunming. In the 1960s and early 1970s the Chinese were appreciated in Udomxai because they donated a network of two-lane paved roads, vital in moving Pathet Lao and NVA troops and supplies around the north during the war. Following the 1979 ideological split over Cambodia (China sided with the Khmer Rouge, Laos with Vietnam), the Chinese withdrew all support until the early 1990s.

The new Chinese influx is regarded by many Udomxai inhabitants as economic infiltration, since the construction and road building is no longer foreign aid but paid work for hire, using plenty of imported Chinese materials and labour.

Because Udomxai has a road system of sorts (it has deteriorated considerably since the 1970s but is still the best in the north), this province is the most accessible of the country's far northern provinces.

To cross the border to China from Udomxai Province, you need to travel east to the Boten border crossing (p201) in Luam Nam Tha Province.

UDOMXAI (MUANG XAI)

ວຸດົມໄຊ (ເມືອງໄຊ)

☎ 081 / pop 80,000

Udomxai is a booming Laos-China trade centre riding on imported Chinese wealth. Although few people visit Udomxai as a tourist destination, it's an important northern crossroads where Rtes 1, 2 and 4 intersect. Thus it's difficult to avoid if you're travelling to Luang Nam Tha or Phongsali from points south.

After roughing it through some beautiful countryside along the Mekong River and along Rte 2 from Pak Beng (or from the east via Nong Khiaw and the Nam Ou), the town seems fairly bland. Modest in size, it features tidy asphalt strips lined with modern buildings and some very comely houses. More traditional thatched houses are spread across the rim of the valley towards the base of the surrounding mountain range. If you get off the main street you can find some very picturesque villagelike sections.

The town is roughly 60% Lao Thoeng and Lao Soung, 25% Chinese and 15% Lao Loum. Thousands of Chinese workers may be in the area at any one time, and the Yunnanese dialect is often heard more than Lao in the cafés and hotels.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Kiosk (Bus station; per hr US\$1.60; ☎ 8am-5pm) Slow but not a bad way to kill time.
Lithavixay Guest House (Rte 1; per hr US\$2; ☎ 7am-9pm) Has three temperamental terminals.
Udomxai Internet (Rte 1; per hr US\$1.80; ☎ 8am-7pm) Speedy and reliable internet access.

MONEY

You can spend yuan, US dollars, Thai baht or kip in Udomxai, but travellers cheques are not accepted, so bring cash.

BCEL (☎ 211260; Rte 1) Changes US dollars, Thai baht or Chinese yuan into kip.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 312059; Rte 4) Changes US dollars, Thai baht or Chinese yuan into kip.

POST

Post office (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Also houses Lao Telecom.

TELEPHONE

Lao Telecom (Post office; ☎ 8-11.30am, 2-4.30pm & 6.30-9pm) Phonecards are available here for use in the international and domestic phone booth out the front.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Udomxay Provincial Tourism Office (☎ 211797; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4pm Oct-Mar, 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-6pm Apr-Sep) Information about onward travel, accommodation and so forth. Also ecotourism tours.

Udomxay Travel (☎ 212020; laos@laotel.com; Rte 1) Car hire, air travel and tours.

Sights & Activities

Samlaan Cycling (☎ 020-5609790; Rte 1) organises excellent one-day cycling tours and two- to five-day combination cycling and trekking tours in and around Udomxai Province. Some of these reach Luang Prabang or go as far north as Muang Sing. Prices vary depending on group size and tour duration. Bicycle rental is also available (US\$3 per day) if you just want to do your own thing.

The **Lao Red Cross** (☎ 312391; steam US\$1, massage per hr US\$3; ☎ 3-7pm) offers Lao-Swedish style massage as well as herbal steam baths.

The Udomxay Provincial Tourism Office (above) arranges one-day trekking tours (US\$3.50 to US\$5 per person) to some of the sights around Udomxai, including Tat Lack Sip-Et and Muang La. It also has a three-day trek to Khamu villages including homestays (US\$28 to US\$50 per person).

Sleeping

Many of the guesthouses in Udomxai cater to Chinese workers and either won't accept other nationalities or will ask double the Chinese price. We've not listed any that we know are guilty of two-tier pricing.

Vilavong Guest House (☎ 212503; r US\$4) This spotless little guesthouse has polished rooms

with warm bed covers and soft beds. All have shared bathrooms, which are spacious and clean and have hot water showers. The industrial owners take pride in their property.

Linda Guest House (☎ 312147; r US\$4) Linda Guest House has 14 simple but slightly stuffy rooms with ceiling fans, lovely clean sheets and towels, and large bathrooms. Some rooms are smaller to accommodate singles, although the price doesn't change. It's a decent option but there's not much to buffer the TV noise.

Linda Guest House II (r US\$4) Once you get past the hodgepodge ground floor, where you may find kilometres of raw sausage and boxes of electrical goods, you'll find reasonable rooms. They're upstairs and are bright and basic with three single beds and a cold shower and squat toilet bathroom attached.

Vivanh Guest House (☎ 212219; r US\$5) This wee establishment only has a handful of rooms but they're tiled and sparkling clean, and have comfortable double beds, fans TV and private bathrooms. The owners are very gracious, and it's excellent value.

Lithavixay Guest House (☎ /fax 212175; r US\$7-15; ☎ ☎) At one of the most accommodating

guesthouses in town, all rooms come with private hot-water shower. The more expensive rooms are larger and include breakfast, satellite TV and air-con. Internet access is available downstairs.

Surinphone Hotel (☎ 212789; srphone@laotel.com; r US\$15; ☎ ☎) This flashy number accommodates the comfort-needy with bright and positively glistening rooms containing TV, generous bathrooms (with bath) and dining tables. The beds are new and the atmosphere welcoming.

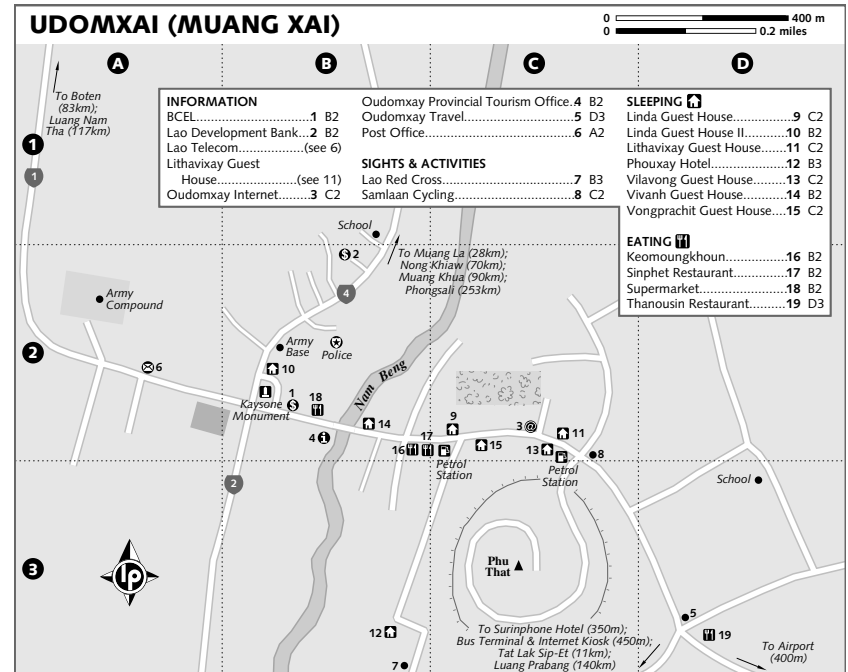
Also available:

Vongprachit Guest House (☎ 312455; r US\$4) Weary but central.

Phouxay Hotel (Phouxai; ☎ 312140; r US\$5, without bathroom US\$4) Decent rooms with TV and bathrooms, or gloomy rooms with shared bathroom.

Eating

The Lao food on local menus often tastes more Chinese than Lao, so you're usually better off ordering Chinese. The restaurants at the guesthouses are good but you generally need to order in advance.



Sinphet Restaurant (meals US\$0.50-1.50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) At the base of a basic guesthouse, this restaurant whips up good Chinese-Lao fusion dishes and a few Western faves such as pancakes and scrambled eggs. The menu boasts plenty of chicken, fish, pork and beef and the owners are bubbly.

Thanousin Restaurant (meals US\$0.50-2) This restaurant is conveniently located near the junction of Rtes 1 and 2 and thus receives a lot of business from drivers passing through. It has the most Lao menu in town, although not everything on the menu is on hand all the time.

Keomoungkhoun (meals US\$1-3) This restaurant has a large dining room and serves extensive Chinese and Lao fare. The fruit shakes are also good, but the owners are often glued to the TV.

There's a supermarket on the main north-south road; there's also a vibrant fresh fruit and vegetable market out front.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lao Airlines (☎ 312047; airport) flies to/from Vientiane (one way/return US\$75/143) every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

BUS & SÄWNGTHÄEW

The Chinese-built bitumen roads that radiate from Udomxai are in fair condition (except for the road to Pak Beng on the Mekong River) and the city is the largest land transport hub in the north.

The **bus terminal** (☎ 212218) is at the southwestern edge of town. Buses head to Luang Prabang (ordinary US\$4, five hours, three daily; VIP US\$5, three hours, two daily), Nong Khiaw (US\$3.10, three to five hours, four daily), Pak Beng (US\$3.30, five hours, two daily), Luang Nam Tha (US\$3.20, four hours, three daily), Muang Khua (US\$2.80, four hours, three daily), Boten (US\$3, four hours, two daily), Phongsali (US\$6, eight to 12 hours, one daily) and Vientiane (ordinary US\$11, 16 hours, two daily; VIP US\$12.10, 16 hours, two daily).

AROUND UDOMXAI

North and south of town there is a string of Hmong villages where the tribespeople have come down from higher elevations – either because of mountaintop deforestation due to swidden agriculture, or because they have

been pressured by the government to integrate into lowland society.

East of town off Rte 1 at Km 11 is **Tat Lak Sip-Et** (Km 11 Waterfall; admission US\$0.50), a slender cataract that cascades over a limestone cliff into a Nam Beng tributary. Look for a small blue-and-white sign (in Lao only) on the northern side of the road.

Baw nām hāwn (hot springs) can be found 28km from Udomxai near Muang La, off the road to Phongsali near the banks of the Nam Pak.

TO LUANG PRABANG VIA PAK BENG

The river-and-road trip from Huay Xai or Luang Prabang to Udomxai is an experience in itself. Three hours by speedboat, or a day's travel by river ferry, the Mekong River journey to Pak Beng (jumping-off point for the road to Udomxai) passes craggy stone cliffs, sandy shores, undulating mountains, fishing villages, and expanses of both primary and secondary forest.

Pak Beng itself (see below) is worth an overnight stay if time allows, then it's on to Udomxai via Rte 2, an old Chinese-built road that runs parallel to the Nam Beng most of the way. The mostly sealed road is very rough in spots but is supposed to be resealed soon. Along the way you'll pass Phu Thai, Thai Lü, Hmong, Thai Dam, Lao and Khamu villages, plus primary monsoon forest alternating with secondary growth and slash-and-burn plots.

At Km 90 (about one-third of the way to Udomxai) is **Muang Houn** (52km from Pak Beng), the largest village between Pak Beng and Udomxai and a convenient rest stop. Muang Houn has a few basic guesthouses including **Bounnam Guest House** (☎ 212289; r US\$2-3). There are also a few places to eat, or stock up on food supplies. Around Km 18 to Km 21 (counting south from Udomxai) are at least a dozen Hmong villages.

There are a couple of scenic waterfalls not far from the main road. **Tat Yong** is said to be the largest and is a 12km hike from Km 87.

PAK BENG

ປາກແບັງ

This rustic town at the junction of the Mekong River and the smaller Nam Beng (Pak Beng means Mouth of the Beng) lies about halfway between Luang Prabang and Huay Xai (Bokeo Province). Pak Beng's mostly

wooden houses sit along a steep hillside. Close to the ferry and speedboat piers is a collection of makeshift shops and cafés that get more interesting the further away from the river you go. Hmong and tribal Thais are frequently seen on the main street. A few vendors along the street sell local textiles and handicrafts. Sip espresso and pe-use new and used books at the **Khok Khor Café & Bookshop**.

Most guesthouses and restaurants in Pak Beng have generators to provide electricity between 6pm and 10pm.

Dangers & Annoyances

In peak season there's a general fear that the number of guests arriving en masse from Huay Xai or Luang Prabang will outnumber the beds in town. This is likely to be a thing of the past as touts often meet the boat lobbying for your business now.

We've also heard about a local scam where groups of young local boys offer to carry your luggage up the hill from the boat, then when you reach your guesthouse they

demand US\$4 for the service. If you decide to enlist the assistance of the boys, consider setting an exact tip beforehand.

Lastly, drugs are fairly abundant in Pak Beng and you can expect to be offered some (particularly if you're male) soon after you arrive. Purchasing is not a good idea for obvious reasons, but the dealers can also be aggressive and you may end parting with more worldly possessions than just a few kip.

Sights & Activities

Two wats of mild interest can be visited in town, both of which are off the left side of the road north, overlooking the Nam Beng. **Wat Khok Kho** is the newer of the two, with a *sim* of rather recent construction and wooden monks' quarters.

Further up the road, a series of stairs on the right-hand side lead past a small school to **Wat Sin Jong Jaeng**, an older temple that dates back to the early French colonial period or possibly earlier. On the front exterior wall of the small but classic Lao *sim* is a mural that includes figures with moustaches and big noses – presumably early Dutch or French visitors. Inside there are a number of Buddha images of varying ages. The Lao-style *thâat* on the premises was constructed in 1991; it's gilded at the top, and the base is said to contain a cache of *sák-sít* (sacred) material (probably small Buddha images of crystal or silver, prayer cloths and rosaries from revered monks).

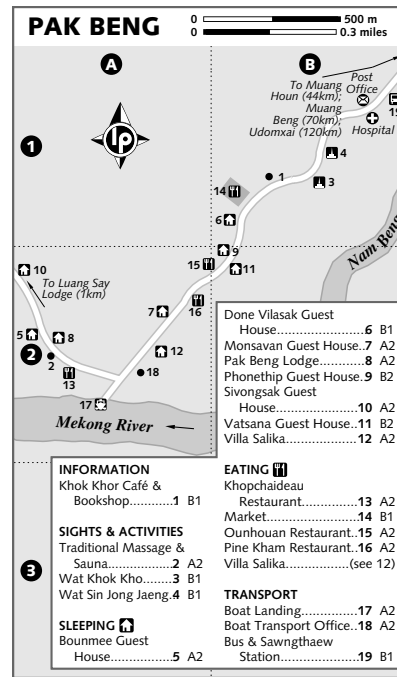
There's a **Traditional Massage & Sauna** (sauna US\$1, massage US\$3; ☺ sauna 4-10pm, massage 8am-noon & 2.30-11.30pm) near Bounmee Guest House, where you can work any kinks out embedded from your boat trip.

Sleeping BUDGET

Most guesthouses in Pak Beng offer small rooms with hard-mattress beds, mosquito nets, and shared facilities around the back or downstairs.

Monsavan Guest House (☎ 5771935; r US\$2-5) This big guesthouse on the main strip has an alabaster front and polished wood doors, but the rooms inside are a simpler affair with bamboo walls and shared bathrooms. It's clean and tidy though and in a good position.

Villa Salika (☎ 212306; r US\$5-7) A good option if you want a step up from basic and budget, the Salika has spacious rooms with twin beds



and private bathrooms. Giant thermoses in the rooms provide hot water for your shower or tea, depending on which need is more urgent. There's no buffer between windows and the street so it can be noisy at night.

Bounmee Guest House (r US\$5-7) To find this one, walk a short distance down a road that branches off the main street, not far from the boat landing. Since it's off the main drag, Bounmee offers a slightly quieter alternative, although the bamboo-and-wood rooms are very similar to those at most other guesthouses. All rooms have private hot-water bathrooms.

Other budget options:

Sivongsagk Guest House (r US\$2) Simple rooms with cold water.

Done Vilasak Guest House (tw US\$2.50) Two-storey wooden place with typical two-bed rooms and shared bathroom.

Vatsana Guest House (☎ 212302; r US\$3) Ten rooms with fan, mosquito net and shared bathroom.

Phonethip Guest House (r US\$3-4) Simple fan rooms, five with shared bathroom and three with private bathroom.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Pak Beng Lodge (r US\$30; ☎) Rivalling Luang Say for the finest digs in town, this relatively recent addition to Pak Beng has indulgent (well for this neck of the woods) and spotless rooms with pretty interiors, Western-style bathrooms and minibars. The common balcony affords good views of the river.

Luang Say Lodge (☎ 212296; www.mekongcruises.com; r from US\$60) If you continue along the road past Bounmee Guest House, you'll come to this ecolodge built mainly for the use of passengers cruising between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang aboard the *Luang Say* (see p218). Built in traditional Lao style of solid wood, the lodge encompasses 19 rooms divided among a dozen or so pavilions, all with fan and private hot-water shower. A terrace restaurant overlooks the Mekong.

Eating

Kopchaideau Restaurant (☎ meals US\$1-2; ☎ 10am-11pm) This popular restaurant sits on a deck overlooking the Mekong and specialises in Indian; the vindaloo and naan are great. There's also a smattering of Lao and Thai on the menu and plenty of vegetarian options.

Pine Kham Restaurant (meals US\$1-2) The kitchen here does justice to a wide range of Thai, Chinese and Lao dishes, plus Western breakfasts.

Villa Salika (☎ 212306; meals US\$1-3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant here has nice river views and tourist-friendly food, although it's a tad overpriced. They can whip up sandwiches in the morning for your boat ride ahead.

Quanhuan Restaurant (meals US\$1.20-2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Elevated from the street, this small eatery does great Lao and Thai food along the lines of *láap* (salads) and creamy coconut curries. Service can be a little erratic and you may not end up with exactly what you ordered, but all the food's good so think of it as a lucky dip.

Market (☎ 6.30am-5pm) In the centre of town, this market has a few vendors with prepared Lao food.

There are several other simple restaurants along the street leading from the pier, most serving *fôe* and a few basic Chinese and Lao dishes.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

See p217 for details on river travel between Pak Beng, Luang Prabang and Huay Xai.

SĂWNGTHĀEW

From the *săwngthāew* and bus station (1.5km from the boat landing), *săwngthāew* run along potholed Rte 2 between Pak Beng and Udomxai (US\$3.30, five hours, two daily).

If you miss one of the direct *săwngthāew* to Pak Beng from Udomxai, you can catch one of the more frequent *săwngthāew* to Muang Houn (US\$2.10, two hours, four to eight daily), 92km southwest of Udomxai on the way to Pak Beng. In Muang Houn it's easy to pick up another *săwngthāew* on to Pak Beng (US\$2, two hours). The same is true in reverse; you can take a *săwngthāew* from Pak Beng to Muang Houn, then pick up a Udomxai-bound vehicle fairly easily. There are two or three basic guesthouses in Muang Houn if you get stuck.

LUANG NAM THA PROVINCE

Blessed with a mountainous tapestry, a vast protected area, and diverse ethnic villages, Luang Nam Tha is synonymous with culture, adventure and trekking for most travellers. Although much of the province is untamed

wilderness, the infrastructure to explore it is some of the best in Laos. Guided explorations into the magnificent Nam Ha National Protected Area (p198), a 2224-sq-km area containing some of the most densely forested regions (96% primary forest cover) in Laos, can be complimented with independent travel to small villages surrounding Muang Sing, Luang Nam Tha and Vieng Phoukha.

The provincial population is 145,000, made up of 39 classified ethnicities (the largest number in the nation), including Hmong, Akha, Mien, Samtao, Thai Daeng, Thai Lü, Thai Neua, Thai Khao, Thai Kalom, Khamu, Lamet, Lao Loum, Shan and Yunnanese. As in Udomxai Province, the Chinese presence is increasing rapidly with the arrival of skilled labourers from Yunnan.

LUANG NAM THA

ຫລວງນ້ຳທາ

☎ 086 / pop 35,400

The capital of the province, Luang Nam Tha is a quiet, ordered town where a grid pattern of streets reveals ever-so-quietly humming businesses and residences. It's a lovely spot to chill out for a couple of days before or after a trek into the Nam Ha NPA (see p198). The town is surrounded by a patchwork of rich rice paddies and ethnically diverse villages, and exploring them would be a highlight of a trip to the area. It's also a transport hub for buses from all directions, including China, and consequently attracts a transient population of traders and travellers, all of whom add to the melting pot.

The original town, which was always prone to flooding, was virtually destroyed during the Second Indochina War, and the administrative centre was consequently moved 7km north in 1976. The newer town centre sits on higher ground, and is close to where the highways come in from Muang Sing, Boten and Udomxai. Most visitors spend their limited time around the main street of this northern district, but the older southern district is mostly residential and, in general, much more interesting. Locals often refer to the southern centre as *meuang* (city-state) and to the northern centre as *khwāeng* (province).

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Cafe (per hr US\$1.80)

KNT Internet (☎ 5486086; per hr US\$1.80; ☎ 8am-10pm) Fast and reliable.

MONEY

BCEL (☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Foreign exchange for US travellers cheques and US dollars, Thai baht and Chinese yuan; cash advances on credit cards.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Exchanges US travellers cheques, US dollars, Thai baht and Chinese yuan.

POST

Post office (☎ 312007; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri)

TELEPHONE

Lao Telecom Long-distance phone services available.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Luang Nam Tha Provincial Tourism Office

(☎ 211534, 312047; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) Excellent tourist office with English-speaking staff. See Activities (p197) for available guided tours.

Sights

At the time of research a **night market** was being constructed near the Provincial Tourism Office. When completed it will showcase a colourful array of textiles, clothing, basketry, paper and other handicrafts from the diverse ethnic groups in the area.

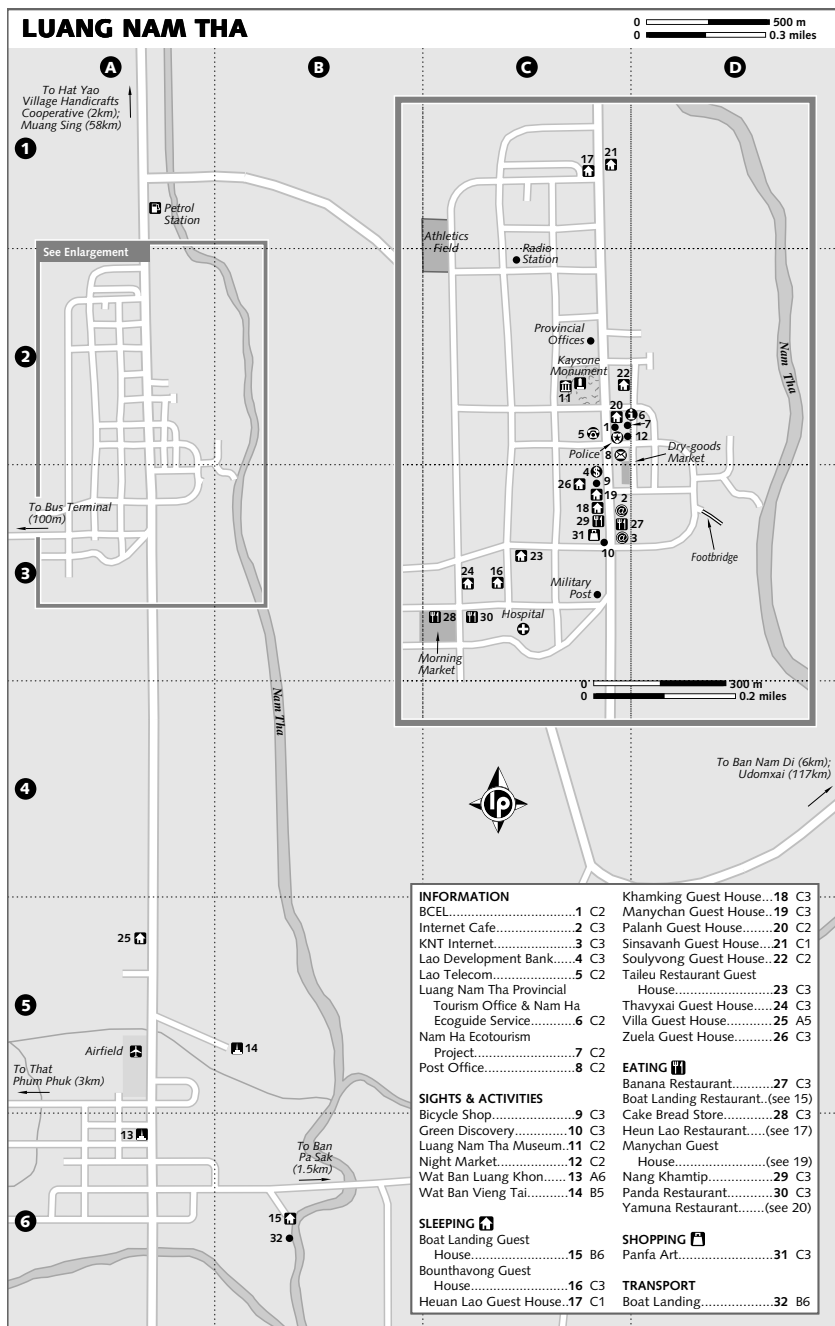
The **Luang Nam Tha Museum** (admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-3.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30-11.30am Fri) contains a collection of local anthropological artefacts, such as ethnic clothing, Khamu bronze drums, and ceramics. There are also a number of Buddha images and the usual display chronicling the Revolution.

Near the airfield are two 50-year-old wats, **Wat Ban Vieng Tai** and **Wat Ban Luang Khon**, both of mild interest. **Ban Luang Khon** itself (the area around Wat Ban Luang Khon) is largely a Thai Kalom neighbourhood.

East across the Nam Tha from the boat landing are four or five Thai Dam villages; at **Ban Pa Sak** you can observe Thai Dam silk weaving in action.

Three kilometres west of the airfield atop a hill surrounded by rice fields stands **That Phum Phuk**, an impressively large stupa that shares stylistic similarities with That Ing Hang and other stupas more customarily found in Southern Laos. The brick-and-stucco stupa is said to have been erected in 1628, although it's likely that its current form dates to a more recent – possibly 19th century – renovation.

During the Second Indochina War a bomb explosion knocked the *jehdii* on its side, where it remains undisturbed. Despite its semiruin



state – a large fig tree is now growing out of the base, lending a 'lost-in-the-jungle' atmosphere – the stupa is well worth visiting if you have any interest in Lao religious architecture, as it's a masterful piece of work. Much of the original stucco ornamentation is still in place; not far from the base stands a *síláa jáaleuk* (stele) inscribed in old Lao script. A newer replica of the stupa was erected nearby in 2003.

You can hire a jumbo from the dry-goods market out to That Phum Phuk for US\$5 return, including waiting time. If you decide to walk or bike, take the graded dirt road that runs west along the south side of the airport. After 700m this road ends at a T-junction. Make a right here and follow this road as it bends around to the northwest and passes rice fields. About 2.3km further on (3km total from the main paved road) you should see a hill to your right. Turn right on another dirt road just before the hill. After 100m on this road, look for a steep road on your left; this leads to the stupa at the top of the hill. Jumbos won't be able to climb this steep road, and you might not be able to pedal it either, especially when it's wet. On foot the climb takes between 10 and 15 minutes. Watch out for leeches in the rainy season.

About 6km northeast of the new town centre, off Rte 1, the Lao Huay (Lenten) village of **Ban Nam Di** is a good place to observe the process of bamboo papermaking. The villagers turn bamboo into pulp along the banks of the Nam Di adjacent to the village. They then spread the pulp into thin sheets over square cotton screens to fashion a rustic paper on which they record religious literature in a script based on Chinese characters. The paper is also much prized these days by the handicraft industry. Less than 1km away from Ban Nam Di is a waterfall that villagers will be glad to take you to for a small tip.

Activities
TREKKING, RAFTING, MOUNTAIN BIKING & KAYAKING

Luang Nam Tha is the main jumping-off point for trekking, rafting, mountain biking and kayaking trips in the magnificent Nam Ha NPA (see the boxed text, p198), and for boat trips down the Nam Tha to the Mekong River (see p201).

Many of the tours stop for at least a night in a village; largely Khamu and Lenten to the south and Akha to the north, west and east,

but there are also Yao, Thai Lü and Thai Dam villages nearby.

All the treks are rewarding, and follow the same sustainability guidelines, but they vary in duration and difficulty. The trails for multiday treks are narrow and steep in parts and involve a decent dose of huffing and puffing. In the wet season you also share the landscape with leeches, but guides are fully versed on extricating the little pests. These are minor inconveniences however, given the spectacular landscape you'll traverse.

At the time of writing, tours were offered by the **Nam Ha Ecoguide Service** (☎ 211534; ☎ 8am-9pm), a wing of the Provincial Tourism Office, and the privately owned **Green Discovery** (☎ 211484; www.greencoverylaos.com; ☎ 8am-9pm). Those offered by Green Discovery differ to those offered by the Tourism Office, in order to eliminate direct competition and increase the spread of proceeds.

CYCLING

Cycling is the ideal way to explore the wats, waterfalls, bans and landscape surrounding Luang Nam Tha. If you're not up for a multiday mountain-bike tour, you can head out at your own pace by renting a mountain bike or ubiquitous rabbit-ear bicycle for US\$0.30/1 per hour/day from the **Bicycle Shop** (☎ 9am-6pm) on the main street. It also rents motorcycles for US\$2 to US\$3 per day.

Sleeping

Most lodging in Luang Nam Tha is in the newer, northern part of town. Rooms fill up fast during the December to March high season, so if you schedule a morning arrival you'll stand a better chance of getting a room.

BUDGET

Besides the places described here, there are a few less desirable Chinese guesthouses in town with overpriced rooms. We don't list them because we don't recommend them.

Sinsavanh Guest House (☎ 211141; r US\$2-4) Sinsavanh occupies a brightly painted two-storey wooden house and offers basic rooms with mosquito nets and capacious shared bathrooms with squat toilets and cold-water showers. There's a pleasant sitting area on the upper terrace.

Khamking Guest House (r US\$5) Glistening and new, the Khamking has plain but welcoming rooms with large, screened windows,

NAM HA NPA

Named for the river that flows through it, the Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA) extends 2224 sq km, from riverine plains to 2000m peaks. Running to the Chinese border and contiguous with Yunnan's Shang Yong NPA, it represents one of the most important international wildlife corridors in the region. Dense evergreen and semi-evergreen submontane forests, and upland broadleaf woodlands harbour clouded leopard, tiger, elephants, gaur, muntjac and 288 bird species. Several different ethnic groups inhabit the Nam Ha NPA, including Lao Huay, Akha and Khamu.

The natural beauty and cultural experiences are reasons enough to visit the Nam Ha NPA, but it's also one of the few projects in Southeast Asia that truly achieves sustainable ecotourism. The collective interest of the Provincial Tourism Office, Unesco and New Zealand government-sponsored **Nam Ha Ecotourism Project** (www.unescobkk.org/culture; Luang Nam Tha), tour operators and villages is to provide a genuine experience to tourists with minimum impact to the local communities and environment. Tours are limited to small groups and each village receives visitors no more than twice a week.

The large pool of trained guides enables each to lead about one trek a month. This ensures an even distribution of proceeds, and more importantly, it prevents communities from becoming dependent on tourism. You'll find that your guides may be teachers, farmers or shop owners who are able to supplement their traditional income from a monthly trek. Provincial Tourism Offices and registered tour operators demonstrate how your tour fee is distributed, and the vast majority (over 50%) goes to the villages and guides.

Many of the trails are established via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Provincial Tourism Office and villages in order to preserve the NPA. Rather than dictate what villages can and can't do, the MOU provides information about sustainable forestry and fishing practises, which in turn maintains the integrity of the villages own environments.

Guided tours into the Nam Ha NPA can be arranged from Luang Nam Tha, Muang Sing (p203) or Vieng Phoukha (p202). Those from Luang Nam Tha are true forest treks, while those from Muang Sing have more of a cultural bent because the area is more heavily populated by ethnic villages. The tours from Vieng Phoukha have been most recently established and see the least amount of tourist traffic. An even blend of village visits and trekking, they are an excellent opportunity for people looking to get off the beaten track.

Tourists also play a major role in the success of any sustainable tourism project, and bearing the following in mind will help to ensure the conservation of the Nam Ha NPA and its communities:

- Always use a registered guide. This prevents local 'entrepreneurs' from undercutting the villages and other guides, and from harming the fragile ecology of the protected area. It's also much safer – it quite literally is a jungle out there.
- If you want to give gifts, fruit and vegetable seeds or saplings are best because they continue to give after you've left. But always ask your guide first if it's appropriate to give anything and if so, only give directly to the chief. Giving gifts to children can encourage begging, which is belittling for people who have always been self-sufficient.
- Always ask permission before taking photos.
- As with all trekking, stick to the trails. See the Responsible Trekking boxed text on p204 for more information.

comfy beds, fans and snug but spotless tiled bathrooms with hot-water showers. You'll have to sit sideways for your ablutions if you're any bigger than a pygmy, but otherwise this is excellent value.

Zuela Guest House (☎ 312183; r US\$5) Another newbie, Zeal is a glorious brick and timber two-storey house with spacious rooms devoid of even a speck of dirt. High ceilings and fans

keep things cool and the big, clean bathrooms have hot water. There are sitting areas upstairs and down, and a laundry service and mountain-bike rental.

Taileu Restaurant Guesthouse (☎ 211266; r US\$5) Behind a restaurant that resembles a concrete bunker, this guesthouse has decent rooms with gloriously comfortable beds, fans, satellite TV and slightly dingy bathrooms with

scoop toilets. The rooms are a tad bunker-like themselves but the restaurant closes at a reasonable hour so it's quiet.

Manychan Guest House (☎ 312209; r US\$5) Central and exceedingly popular, this guesthouse has had a good makeover and contains pleasant, fan-cooled rooms with temperamental hot-water showers.

Huean Lao Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 211111; r US\$6) The atmospheric rooms beneath this restaurant (see right) are cool and dark, with fans and Western-style bathrooms. The aesthetics are appealing, with a modicum of traditional textiles and handicrafts in each room.

Thavyxai Guest House (☎ 5110292; r US\$6.50) A great choice close to the bus station, Thavyxai has immaculate rooms that verge on hotel standard. Dazzling white interiors contain fans, TVs, large beds and pristine, Western bathrooms. It's run by a friendly family and is a good spot for a quiet night's sleep.

Also available:

Soulyvong Guest House (☎ 312256; s/d US\$3/5) Cheap, friendly and simple.

Bounthavong Guest House (☎ 312256; r US\$3-5) Cool, clean rooms with thick floor mattresses and attached squat-toilet bathrooms.

Palanh Guest House (☎ 312439; r US\$5) Worn but reliable.

MIDRANGE

Villa Guest House (☎ 312425; r incl breakfast US\$20) Just south of town, this guesthouse is a notch up from most in town and offers light and spacious rooms with plenty of sunlight, large beds, spotless tiled bathrooms and TV. The décor is colourful, and there's an open-air restaurant (meals US\$2 to US\$4), open for dinner.

Boat Landing Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 312398; www.theboatlanding.laopdr.com; r incl breakfast US\$32-42) Located 6km south of the new town and about 150m off the main road, this quiet lodge close to the Nam Tha boat landing offers easy access to the Nam Tha river and several Thai Dam villages. Spacious, nicely designed wooden bungalows feature verandas overlooking the river, and private bathrooms with solar-heated showers. There's also an excellent restaurant on the premises. The staff can arrange rafting or tubing excursions on the Nam Tha, fishing trips, bird-watching, mountain biking and trekking to nearby villages or to the Nam

Ha NPA with English- and French-speaking guides. Bicycles are available for hire.

Eating

Banana Restaurant (☎ 5718026; meals US\$1-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Underneath a shady thatched roof, this entrepreneurial little restaurant captivates the *falang* market with Western breakfasts (even cornflakes) plus a long menu of fried chicken, pork and vegetarian dishes (spicy and mild), plus curries, Thai dishes and salads. It's cheap and tasty food.

Panda Restaurant (☎ 5663122; meals US\$1.50-2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The huge menu at this modest, open-air restaurant encompasses everything from (divine) pancakes and eggs to fish on tomato chilli, beef with basil and tasty tofu fry-ups. The fruit shakes are also delicious and it's run by an affable family.

Huean Lao (☎ 211111; meals US\$1.50-3; ☎ lunch & dinner) With its open-air, 2nd-floor dining room and polished wood floors, Huean Lao easily has the nicest atmosphere of any eatery located in the northern part of town. The mostly Lao menu is authentic and tasty – try the dried pickled bamboo with pork or the tangy chicken with chilli.

Manychan Guest House (☎ 312209; meals US\$1.50-2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The most popular *falang* venue in town has an extensive menu boasting Lao, Thai and tame Chinese dishes. The chef's spell in Vientiane and Luang Prabang restaurants has served the kitchen well and the buzzing tourists manage to wolf down their meals while swapping trekking tales and glasses of Beerlao.

Yamuna Restaurant (meals US\$1.50-2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The inventive menu at this Indian restaurant satisfies subcontinent cravings with curries of all piquants as well as South Indian specialties like Masala dosa. The stock of tables are neatly ordered inside and out.

Boat Landing Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 312398; US\$2-5) Although it's the most expensive place to eat in Nam Tha (but only by a small measure), the restaurant here serves the best and most authentic northern Lao cuisine you'll find in Nam Tha outside the market. The menu includes a good selection of vegetarian dishes. A *tuk-tuk* (round trip US\$1) departs Green Discovery at 6.30pm every night, and returns at 8.45pm.

The large morning market next to the bus terminal contains a couple of very good *fôe* places and several *khào sawy* stands.

Also recommended:

Cake Bread Store (meals US\$0.30-1; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Delicious tarts, rolls and baguettes.

Nang Khamtip (meals US\$0.40-1; ☎ 7am-2pm) Some of the best *fôe*, *khào piak* (rice soup) and *khào sáwy* in Laos.

Shopping

Panfa Art (☎ 5698684) This small textiles shop on the main street sells some truly stunning scarves and wall hangings made from raw silk. It's all locally crafted and the workmanship of some of the pieces is quite bamboozling.

There's also a tiny, nameless textiles shop (well the front of someone's house really) opposite the Provincial Offices on the main street, which sells vivid silks, *sin* (traditional sarongs) and scarves at reasonable prices.

Getting There & Away

AIR

At the time of writing Luang Nam Tha's airport was under renovations in order to become an 'International' airport. The idea is to cater to flights from Thailand, although Chinese investment is likely to make more use of it. Once construction is completed **Lao Airlines** (☎ 312180) is likely to resume its flights to/from Luang Prabang (one way/return US\$45/86) and Vientiane (one way/return US\$84/160). Schedules are anyone's guess.

If you don't want to bus the whole way up here consider a flight to Udomxai (see p192) and then take a bus from there.

BOAT

See the Nam Tha River Trip (opposite) for details on boat transport between Luang Nam Tha and the Mekong River.

BUS & SÄWNGTHÄEW

The main **bus terminal** (☎ 312164) is just west of the morning market.

Luang Nam Tha can be reached via all-weather Rte 1 from Udomxai (US\$3.20, four hours, three daily). A side road going north off Rte 1 about one-third of the way to Udomxai leads directly to Boten (US\$2, two hours, four daily) on the Lao-Chinese border. At the intersection of Rte 1 and the road to Boten, the small town of Na Toei has one guesthouse (US\$2), a market, health clinic and customs checkpoint.

A *säwngthäew* plies daily between Luang Nam Tha and Ban Na Lae (US\$3.90, three

hours, 9am), roughly halfway to Pak Tha alongside the Nam Tha.

One *säwngthäew* travels daily to Huay Xai (US\$6.50, eight hours), stopping in Vieng Phoukha (US\$2.50, four hours) on the way, and there are about six *säwngthäew* to Muang Sing daily (US\$2, two hours). There is also one bus daily to Muang Long (see p209; US\$3.60, five hours).

One bus a day also goes to/from Luang Prabang (US\$7, eight hours, 8.30am). It's the same bus that goes to Vientiane (US\$14, 19 hours) and because you can't buy tickets the day before, it's advisable to get the bus station early as it fills up fast.

Getting Around

From the bus terminal to the main street a jumbo costs US\$0.50. Jumbos from the main street to the airport, 7km away, cost US\$4. Shared pick-ups also ply this route several times daily for just US\$0.30 per person.

To the Nam Tha boat landing, or the nearby Boat Landing Guest House & Restaurant, figure on US\$5 to charter a jumbo from the bus terminal, or US\$0.30 per person on a shared jumbo as far as the turn-off for the boat landing. From that intersection it's only around 150m to the boat landing or the guesthouse.

You can hire bikes and motorcycles from a shop in town; see p197.

BOTEN

ບໍຕັນ

This village on the Chinese border in the northeastern corner of Luang Nam Tha Province is little more than a transit point for visitors travelling between Laos and China, since Boten is a legal border crossing for all nationalities. There's a branch of Lao Development Bank in Boten where US dollars, Thai baht and Chinese yuan may be exchanged for kip, but not vice versa. **Bou Vanh Guest House** (☎ 071-252606; r US\$5) has basic rooms and shared bathrooms, and there are around 10 small restaurants and noodle shops serving simple dishes. However, much better facilities are available in Mengla on the Chinese side. Many Chinese visit Boten on day passes to buy imported Thai goods.

See Luang Nam Tha (left) and Udomxai (p192) for details on transport to/from Boten.

CROSSING THE CHINESE BORDER AT MOHAN & BOTEN

From Mohan in the Yunnan Province, China, you can legally enter Laos at Boten in the Luang Nam Tha Province, Laos. Thirty-day tourist visas for Laos are available from the Lao immigration post on arrival in Boten for US\$30, plus any overtime fees the officials may like to charge. To cross in the opposite direction, into China, you will need to have arranged a Chinese visa in advance.

The Lao border crossing is open from 8am to 4pm, while the Chinese crossing is open from 8am to 5pm. The best time of day to cross into Laos from China is the early morning when public transport onward to Luang Nam Tha and Udomxai is most frequently available. Similarly, the best time to cross the border into China is early in the morning; this enables you to get transport to Mengla relatively easily.

From Boten it's a short bus hop to the provincial capital, Luang Nam Tha, but if you arrive in Boten too late to take a bus, there are a couple of cheap guesthouses (US\$1 to US\$2) in the border town.

NAM THA RIVER TRIP

When the water is high enough, open-topped, longtail passenger boats navigate the Nam Tha between Pak Tha (where the Nam Tha feeds into the Mekong River) and Luang Nam Tha. This is a beautiful two-day river trip and it can be expensive, but thoroughly worthwhile as it's one of the few authentic river journeys in the region.

Along the way you can stop off and visit **Tham Davadeung**, a cave complex containing a large Buddha and several caverns. The cave is a short hike from the village of Ban Mo on the western bank of the river, about a third of the way between Pak Tha and Luang Prabang. Ask in the village for a key to the cave and a local guide to lead the way. A tip is expected for this service. Near **Ban Peng**, a village further along towards Pak Tha, there are reportedly two waterfalls and two caves of interest.

Most travellers stop over in **Ban Na Lae**, a charming village, located more or less the halfway point between Pak Tha and Luang Nam Tha.

In Pak Tha itself, you can visit an old Buddhist temple and wander through the local market.

Sleeping & Eating

Whether you manage to charter a boat for the entire trip, or have to change boats in Ban Na Lae, you will have to spend at least one night along the way.

There are two **guesthouses** (r US\$2) in Na Lae, one near the boat landing, the other at the local market, and a noodle shop.

In Pak Tha you can stay at the **Souphanee Guest House** (r US\$2) or the basic **Anusone Guest House** (r US\$5).

You may also stay at your boatman's home, depending on where he lives along the river. Figure on spending about US\$4 for the night; this generally includes a dinner of instant noodles and the price is negotiated when you charter your boat.

Getting There & Away

Because so many foreigners enter Laos via Huay Xai in the north, more people take this trip upstream from Pak Tha (about 36km via the Mekong River from Huay Xai) to Luang Nam Tha rather than vice versa, although the reverse direction is faster and less expensive.

Whether upriver or downriver, there is no regular boat service all the way from one end to the other, so you need to charter a boat. Many boat pilots in Pak Tha will only go as far as Na Lae. Conversely, most boat pilots in Luang Nam Tha will also only take you to Na Lae. We've heard reports of boat pilots who say they will take you the whole way, but who then stop in Na Lae and refuse to go further. For this reason, you should not pay for the trip until you reach the agreed-upon destination.

Charter prices vary according to several factors, including size of the boat, amount of paid cargo, river level and current fuel costs. In the March to May dry season, boats don't run at all since the river is usually too low for navigation then.

FROM LUANG NAM THA

If you're heading downriver from Luang Nam Tha, it's a good idea to get accurate advice about the river conditions from the **Boat Landing Guest House & Restaurant** (☎ 312398) – see p199. You can charter a boat for four to 10 people from the **boat station** (☎ 312014), **Nam**

Tha River Boatman's Association (☎ 211305) right next door, or book through **Green Discovery** (☎ 211484; www.greeniscoverylaos.com). The latter charges a small booking fee. At the time of research the *approximate* cost of a boat from Luang Nam Tha to Na Lae was US\$100, to Pak Tha US\$170 and all the way to Huay Xai US\$180 to US\$200. Initiatives were afoot to establish more economical rates for travellers so these may change. Also, if you manage to find a boat going with a lot of paid cargo, your charter price could come down.

FROM HUAY XAI

From Huay Xai the best way to charter a boat is to speak to the boatmen directly – you can find them to the left of the immigration boat landing. You'll need to speak Lao or acquire the services of an interpreter as most of the boatmen don't speak English. The alternative that most travellers are faced with is to organise the trip through one of the tour agencies in town, who take up to 50% of the fare. This leaves the boatmen understandably disgruntled as they're barely making any money off the trip. Additionally, most boatmen in Huay Xai are reluctant to go further than Na Lae due to their inexperience with the rapids beyond here. So you may need to charter a second boat from Na Lae. Charters from Huay Xai to Na Lae cost US\$100 to US\$120, and from Na Lae to Luang Nam Tha around US\$85. If you can find someone to go all the way from Huay Xai to Luang Nam Tha a charter is around US\$180 to US\$200. BAP Guest House (p216) is a good place to get information about the boat trip, and to arrange boat travel down the Mekong to Pak Tha, where you can then arrange for a boat up the Nam Tha.

TOURS

Finally, a much pricier but easier alternative is to book a Nam Tha River tour with Green Discovery. Tours start in either Huay Xai or Luang Nam Tha and last for two days. Rates include dinner and an overnight stay in the boatman's home and the cost per person is US\$424/222/154/121/100/87 for one/two/three/four/five/six people.

So far speedboats aren't allowed on the Nam Tha. This appears to be more a case of quashing competition than harbouring concerns about noise pollution or safety, but the absence of speedboats makes the Nam Tha trip all the more pleasant.

LUANG NAM THA TO HUAY XAI

Route 3 between Luang Nam Tha and Huay Xai passes through several different kinds of terrain, from river plain to high mountains. The road is gradually being improved, and most vehicles with high road-clearance can make the drive as long as it's not too wet.

Vieng Phoukha

Vieng Phoukha is a pleasant trading town largely populated by Khamu farmers and mine workers. Sitting 66km south of Luang Nam Tha on Rte 3 towards Huay Xai, it doesn't draw too much stopover traffic, but it offers some of the most spectacular trekking in Luang Nam Tha Province...and that's saying something for a province defined by its magnificent landscape. The **Vieng Phoukha Ecoguide Service** (☎ 212400, 020-5985289) has an office on Rte 3 in the village centre, and arranges four treks to the region, ranging from one to three days. These treks are an excellent balance of cultural and natural exploration; they visit Akha, Khamu and Lahu ethnic villages, as well as various local limestone caves, including the 5km-long **Tham Nam Eng**. These caves have some of the most complex natural underground formations of any in Laos. Guides can also lead you to see the ruins of **Wat Mahapot** and the **khúu wieng** (city walls) of an abandoned city thought to be 400 years old. The three-day Akha Trail encompasses the southern section of the Nam Ha NPA (see boxed text, p198), which is the stomping grounds of the endangered Black Cheek Crested Gibbons. Accommodation for multi-day treks is homestays in villages. These treks are some of the most authentic in northern Laos, simply because they don't see much tourist traffic.

Vieng Phoukha has four guesthouses, all of them simple thatched-bamboo or wooden affairs: **Phonsavath** (☎ 212397; r US\$3-5), **Don Vieng** (☎ 212394; r US\$3-5), **Vieng Phoukha** (☎ 212390; r US\$3-5) and **Bo Kung** (r US\$3-5). All cater mostly to passing truck drivers, and each has its own rustic karaoke bar. Of the lot, Bo Kung is the quietest as it's about a kilometre off the main road through town.

There are one or two *sáwnghãew* daily to/from Huay Xai (US\$4.50, five hours), Luang Nam Tha (US\$2.50, three hours) and Udomxai (US\$4.50, seven hours). They depart and arrive from the market in the village centre.

Chaloen Suk

This small Khamu village inside the Nam Ha NPA is about 32km south of Luang Nam Tha. It makes a lovely day trip from Luang Nam Tha by bicycle, but it's also worthwhile spending the night here. The Nam Ha Ecoguide Service (see p197) has established a homestay in the village, providing the community with a share of the tourist dollar and travellers with the opportunity to spend a night with the Khamu. A one-night tour costs US\$6.50 per person and includes your accommodation, dinner, breakfast and a day's guided trekking through the forest. You can also incorporate a night here into a longer trek or just book the homestay and make your own way to the village.

MUANG SING

ເມືອງສິງ

☎ 081 / pop 29,307

Lying on the broad river plains of the Nam La northwest of Luang Nam Tha, Muang Sing is a small town that grows on you by the hour. Its main appeal is a confluence of cultures – a traditional Thai Lü and Thai Neua cultural nexus, it's also a trade centre for Thai Dam, Akha, Hmong, Mien, Lolo and Yunnanese. This makes for some colourful people scenery in town, and traditional garb is a mainstay here. It's a utopia for trigger-happy photographers, but gaining permission for all shots will ensure a much more rewarding visit.

Beyond the town limits lies a bucolic mantle of rice paddies and quiet *bãan*, framed by hilly monsoon forest to the south and rising mountains to the north. It's magical territory to explore, particularly for culture junkies.

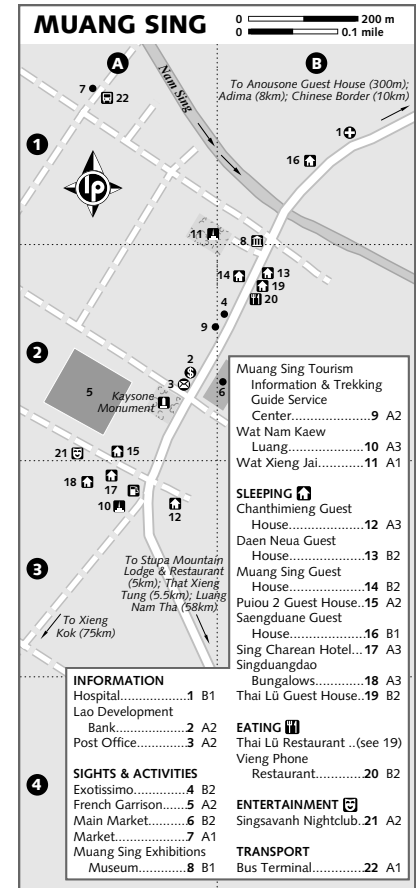
One of the arms of the 'China Road' passes through Muang Sing on its way to Mengla in Yunnan Province, China, and the area has come under a lot of Chinese influence since the 1960s. Visiting Chinese soldiers can be seen strutting around the streets and even some local hill-tribe men wear olive-drab Mao hats. Most telling is the presence of Chinese tractors, often bearing Chinese licence tags and transporting goods and people back and forth from the Chinese border – sugar cane to China, garlic and onions to Muang Sing.

History

From at least the late 16th century until 1803 Muang Sing belonged to the Thai principality of Chiang Khong, after which it came

under the control of the Nan Kingdom. In the early 19th century much of Muang Sing's population was transferred to Chiang Kham district in Nan (now part of Thailand). Both the Siamese and the British subsequently laid claim to the area, but in 1896 France took Muang Sing as part of French Indochina.

As soon as the French left Laos in 1954, the area fell into the conflict between the Royal Lao Government and the Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao. From then until the Pathet Lao takeover of Vientiane in 1975, ancient Muang Sing served as a setting for a series of international intrigues involving the Chinese, Vietnamese, Americans and Lao. The famous American 'jungle doctor'



RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Laos, consider the following tips when trekking.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large trekking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer or sand instead of detergent.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoil in place.

Tom Dooley, a pawn of the CIA in Laos from 1957 to 1961 and a man who courted Catholic sainthood until he was dismissed from the US Navy for his sexual orientation, founded a hospital in Muang Sing during this era. The town was virtually abandoned until after the 1975 revolution.

Information

Lao Development Bank (☎) 8am-noon & 2-3.30pm (Mon-Fri) Exchanges US dollars, Thai baht and Chinese yuan but at less than favourable rates.

Post office (☎) 8am-4pm (Mon-Fri)

Sights

ARCHITECTURE

Among the buildings in Muang Sing left standing from the French era is a 75-year-old brick and plaster **French garrison** that once housed Moroccan and Senegalese troops. It's now a Lao army outpost and some of the buildings have been restored; others stand in ruins.

Along the town's main street you'll also see hybrid Lao-French architecture where the ground-floor walls are brick and stucco and the upstairs walls are wooden. The top

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. The cutting of wood for fires in popular trekking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a lightweight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team. In alpine areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.
- If you patronise local accommodation, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire'. Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage hunting. It is illegal in all parks and reserves.
- Don't buy items made from endangered species.
- Don't attempt to exterminate animals in huts. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

Camping & Walking on Private Property

- Always seek permission to camp from landowners.
- Public access to private property without permission is acceptable where public land is otherwise inaccessible, so long as safety and conservation regulations are observed.

Useful Websites

- **www.ecotourismlaos.com** This website, established by the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA), is a great resource for trekking, cultural activities and ecotourism throughout Laos.

floor usually features a long wooden-railed veranda overlooking the street.

One of the better examples of the latter architectural style has been restored to contain the **Muang Sing Exhibitions Museum** (admission US\$0.50; ☎) 8.30am-4pm (Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat), also known as the Tribal Museum. Inside is a collection of cultural artefacts from the area. On display are fishing utensils, looms, cooking utensils, old gongs, bells, pottery, musical instruments, Lao-style Buddha images, local ethnic costumes and a Buddha votive. The house containing the exhibition was once

occupied by a local prince named Phanya Sekong. Note that the opening hours aren't always adhered to.

The two Buddhist temples in town show Thai Lü architectural influence. At **Wat Xieng Jai** on the main street, you can see this in the monastic quarters, with the massive steps and tiny windows, while in the less typical, rustic *wihāan* (main Buddha sanctuary) you'll see classic Thai Lü-style *thóng* (long vertical prayer flags woven of colourful patterned cloth and bamboo). Red- and silver-lacquered pillars are also a Thai Lü temple design characteristic.

THE STORY OF O

Once upon a time, Muang Sing produced four to five tonnes of opium per year, about 3% of all opium produced in Laos. Some surveys estimate that over 45% of Akha villages were cultivating opium in 2000. This situation has changed drastically since the prime minister's decree of December 2000, ordering the elimination of opium in Lao PDR by 2006. Although the crop has not been entirely eradicated, the use of it as a commercial enterprise is now nonexistent.

Opium is still used in some villages as medicine, as food, in exchange for hired labour, for the hosting of guests and for spiritual ceremonies. A darker statistic estimates that there are still over a thousand opium addicts in Muang Sing, whose addiction rate as a district ranks fifth in all of Laos. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia the hill tribes appear to be most susceptible.

Opium is traditionally a condoned vice of the elderly, yet an increasing number of young people in the villages are now taking opium, heroin and amphetamines. In the town of Muang Sing, local Yunnanese and hill-tribe addicts sometimes peddle opium openly to *falang* visitors, thus setting a poor example for unaddicted local youth, and everyone knows where the local 'dens' are. If you're tempted to experiment with a little 'O', keep in mind the effect your behaviour may have on the local culture – you may smoke once and a few weeks later be hundreds of kilometres away, while the villagers continue to face the temptation every day.

Further south near the beginning of the road to Xieng Kok, **Wat Nam Kaew Luang** also has monastic quarters in the Thai Lü style, actually converted from a former *wihān*. Mudbrick antechambers before a wooden passageway leading to the *wihān* are unusual and may be a Yunnanese addition.

The northern end of town is the best place to see thatched Thai Lü and Thai Dam houses known as *héuan hōng* (swan houses).

MARKETS

The **main market** at Muang Sing – *talāat nyai* in Lao, *kaat long* in Thai Lü – was once the biggest opium market in the Golden Triangle, a function officially sanctioned by the French. It was also one of the most colourful markets in northern Laos, selling textiles and wares from Thai Dam, Thai Lü, Hmong and Akha among other ethnic groups. But today it's largely a venue for fresh produce and Chinese-made, Western-style clothing.

Another **market** near the bus station in the town's northwest sells fresh produce and all manner of plastic goods and production-line clothing, which is great if you need to stock up on flip-flops or Tupperware.

VILLAGES

A number of Lao Thoeng and Lao Soung villages in the vicinity – particularly those of the Akha – can be visited on foot from Muang Sing. In general you'll find Hmong and Akha villages to the west and north-west of Muang Sing in the hills, repatriated

Mien to the northeast, and Thai Neua and Thai Dam to the south. The Thai Dam are doing the best weaving in the district these days. One of the closest Thai Dam villages is Nong Bua.

Activities

The **Muang Sing Tourism Information & Trekking Guide Service Center** (☎ 020-2393534; 📍 8-11am & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-10am & 3-5pm Sat & Sun) has seven different treks to remote hill-tribe villages in the area, ranging from one- to three-day treks including homestays. Prices are US\$35 per person per day for one person, but drop significantly the more people there are (as little as US\$10 if there are seven people).

Exotissimo (www.exotissimo.com; 📍 8am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) have a recently opened office right next door and offer day trips to eight different villages in the area. Its operation may have expanded to multiday trips by the time you read this.

If you're not up for a tour, you can experience Muang Sing's verdant surrounds by hiring a mountain bike (see Getting Around, p209) and riding north to within spitting distance of the Chinese border. The road passes by friendly *bāan* where people offer waves and *sabqi-diis*, and seamless rice paddies with hazy mountains rising in the background. Heading north the road is on a slight incline so making a start in the morning is a good idea, mostly so you can enjoy the free wheeling back in the hotter afternoon. Some guesthouses sell a sketch map

with information about the various villages and how to find them for about US\$0.75.

The Chinese–Lao border (crossings legal for Lao and Chinese citizens only) is only 10km from Muang Sing, with a checkpoint 1km before the border. Along the way the narrow, paved road (originally constructed by the French) passes through three villages, including one called **Ban Nakham** at Km 100 (about 4km or 5km from the Chinese border) whose mudbrick homes suggest a Yunnanese population.

Festivals & Events

During the full moon of the 12th lunar month, which usually occurs between late October and mid-November, all of Muang Sing and half of the province turns out for the **That Xieng Tung Festival**. Centred around a Thai Lü stupa (That Xieng Tung) on a sacred hill 5.5km south of town, the festival combines Theravada Buddhism and animistic elements of worship, and includes many of the ceremonies associated with the That Luang Festival in Vientiane (which occurs at the same time).

The *thàat* is around 10m high and is constructed in the Lanna–Lan Xang style, with a stepped, whitewashed octagonal base and gilded spire. A shrine building off to one side contains a row of Buddha images on a sarcophagus like Thai Lü altar.

The festival begins a few days before the official full moon day as merit-makers climb a broad winding path to the *thàat* grounds atop the hill and pay their respects by carrying offerings of candles, flowers and incense around the base of the stupa – a tradition called *wien thien*. On the morning of the full moon Buddhist monks from around the province gather at the stupa for *ták bàat*, the collection of alms and food. There are also traditional dance performances, carnival-style game booths, and plenty of food vendors selling *khào laam* (sweetened sticky rice baked in bamboo), noodles and other snacks. Many Chinese vendors cross over from Yunnan during the festival to sell cheap Chinese cigarettes, beer and apples. Festival activities spill over into town, where there are nightly outdoor Lao pop-music performances with lots of drinking and dancing. Food vendors line the main street at night with candlelit tables.

In spite of its Thai Lü origins, the That Xieng Tung Festival is celebrated by virtually all ethnic groups in the area (including festival-goers from as far away as Xishuangbanna, the original Thai Lü homeland in China's Yunnan Province), as much for its social and entertainment value as for anything else. This is the biggest event of the year here, and one of the best times to visit Muang Sing.

THE BATTLE FOR LUANG NAM THA'S FORESTS

Across Luang Nam Tha, vast tracts of forest are being cleared to fuel the increasing economic partnership between Lao and China. Cash crops such as banana, corn and sugar cane are replacing traditional agriculture at a rapid pace, as the appetite of the Chinese economy continues to swell. Although the crops have brought millions of dollars to Laos, the ultimate winner is corporate China, and the environmental impact, particularly in the case of rubber plantations, poses a devastating, long-term threat.

The forests of Luang Nam Tha, and in particular Nam Ha NPA, are some of the most biodiverse in Southeast Asia. So rich is the park in flora and fauna that it has been declared an Asean Natural Heritage Site. Unfortunately this has not prevented over 4,580 ha of degraded forest in the province being cleared for rubber plantations.

Replacing natural forest with a monocrop reduces biodiversity and erodes the soil, not only within its borders but in the surrounding area also. In July and August 2006, heavy rains in the Luang Nam Tha district that would once have been absorbed by the indigenous landscape resulted in flooding, killing at least two people and damaging countless hectares of farmland. Additionally this devastation reduces the land that can be used for ecotourism; an endeavour that reaps greater and more egalitarian financial rewards as well as social benefits. There is a push from the Unesco Nam Ha Ecotourism project to limit the future of rubber plantations in favour of expanded ecotourism. Although this decision is well and truly out of tourists' hands, they can contribute by taking a guided tour into the park, consequently fuelling the sustainable alternative to cash crops.

Sleeping

Thai Lü Guest House (☎ 212375; r US\$3) The large and airy rooms with simple beds, mosquito nets and squat-toilet bathrooms at this atmospheric guesthouse run off a lovely timber balcony upstairs. It's all housed in a two-storey French-era wooden structure.

Chanthimieng Guest House (☎ 212351; r US\$4-8) Just opened at the time of research, this guesthouse has fresh, wide-open rooms with less-than-comfy beds but decent bathrooms with Western toilets and cold showers. The location, off the main street, is idyllic, and the sweeping balcony upstairs makes the most of the oceanic rice paddies out back. The owners adopt all guests upon entry.

Anouzone Guest House (r US\$5) Just outside of town, this grand-looking guesthouse has fine rooms with polished floors and bathrooms, hot-water showers and ample space. It's not as interesting as some of the cheaper guesthouses but an extra US\$2 buys you a good dose of clean comfort.

Singduangdao Bungalows (r US\$5) Tucked behind a clutch of residences, this spread of bungalows is set on a spacious property. Some of the bungalows are brick but the nicest are the timber and bamboo versions with plenty of room, spotless interiors and hot water showers.

Saengduane Guest House (☎ 212376; r US\$5-8) At the northern end of town is the large and well-run Saengduane. This concrete/plaster rectangular building has simple rooms out the back with acceptable cold-water showers, mosquito nets and wallpapered floors. There are also two thatched bungalows with hot-water bathrooms. With good views across to the mountains from the balcony, there are even better views from the accessible rooftop. There's also a restaurant out front.

Sing Charean Hotel (☎ 212347; r US\$5-8) In a large alabaster building, this spot has clean but ageing and slightly clinical rooms. They're a huge step up from the very budget guesthouses though and the bright bathrooms have hot water. It's accommodating enough, just a little soulless.

Puiou 2 Guest House (☎ 212348; r US\$9) Cornered around a grassy lawn, this series of quaint concrete and bamboo bungalows have gloriously tidy interiors, comfortable beds, fans and clean, tiled bathrooms with hot-water showers. They're a private alter-

native to the guesthouses and each has a wee veranda.

Stupa Mountain Lodge & Restaurant (☎ 020-5686555; stupamtn@laotel.com; r US\$10) Sitting pretty on a hillside 5km south of 'town', this lodge has a handful of lovely wooden bungalows with hot-water bathrooms and private verandas. There's also a restaurant on site.

Also available:

Daen Neua Guest House (☎ 212369; r US\$3) Basic rooms upstairs with grotty bathrooms.

Muang Sing Guest House (☎ 212375; s/d US\$3/4) Snug but airy rooms and affable owners. Glorious views from the roof.

OUTSIDE MUANG SING

Adima (☎ 212372; r US\$5-6) In a village 8km outside Muang Sing towards the Chinese border, the Adima's ethnic-style houses are set in the middle of rice paddies, and the guesthouse is within walking distance of several Mien and Akha villages. Adima offers ad-hoc transport to/from Muang Sing throughout the day (US\$0.50).

Eating

Daen Neua Guest House Restaurant (☎ 212369; meals US\$0.60-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The street-front restaurant beneath this guesthouse dishes up good, hot, filling Lao and Thai food, plus good fruit shakes.

Vieng Phone Restaurant (meals US\$0.80-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cavernous indoor restaurant could do with a splash of sunshine on the menu, but it's a decent spot to fill up on pad thai, fried rice, *laap* and roasts (including fish). Western breakfasts cater to those who aren't up for hot noodles first thing in the am.

Thai Lü Restaurant (☎ 212375; meals US\$1-1.60; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Muang Sing's best spot for authentic Thai Lü fare such as *nam pik awng* – fermented soy bean paste, or *jeow* (local chilli paste), wafers. There are also Thai, Lao and Western dishes and the wide-open setting makes for a pleasant spot to enjoy it all.

Most of the guesthouses have small dining areas downstairs and the main street is peppered with simple *fôe* shops selling tasty cheap fare. The large market next to the bus station sells a limited selection of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Entertainment

Singsavanh Nightclub (☎ 9-11.30pm) Most of Muang Sing is dead asleep by 9pm except at the Singsavanh, near the Sing Charean Hotel, where the locals get down to live Lao and Chinese pop.

Getting There & Away

Sáwngháew ply back and forth between Muang Sing and Luang Nam Tha (US\$2, two hours, about six daily). The winding, partially sealed 58km road from Luang Nam Tha to Muang Sing parallels the Nam Tha, Nam Luang and Nam Sing, crossing them at various points along the way, and passes through strikingly beautiful monsoon forest and several hill-tribe villages. The deep trench you'll see alongside the road between Nam Tha and Muang Sing is part of a hydropower and irrigation project intended to serve the Muang Sing plain.

There are also about four *sáwngháew* a day to Xieng Kok (US\$2, three to four hours).

In Muang Sing, most passenger vehicles depart from the 'new' bus terminal in the northwest of town, near the Nam Sing.

CHINA

Although Muang Sing is only 10km from the Chinese border, you can't legally cross into China here without permission arranged through the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) in Vientiane (see p91).

Getting Around

Bicycle hire is available from most guest houses and the Muang Sing Tourism Information & Trekking Guide Service Center (p206) for around US\$2 per day. There are no jumbos or public transport within Muang Sing.

XIENG KOK

ນອງນົກ

Roughly 72km from Muang Sing via a smooth, graded road that parallels the Nam Ma much of the way, this bustling river port on the Mekong River has little to attract the traveller aside from its semiremote location. Until as recently as the early 1990s, up to six refineries along the Mekong between Xieng Kok and Huay Xai refined opium for world markets. Today huge Chinese barges from Yunnan Province call at Xieng Kok frequently, and it's reported that Xieng Kok is a major

smuggling conduit for opium, heroin and amphetamines in both directions, depending on market destination.

Perhaps the best time to schedule a Xieng Kok visit is on the 14th and 28th of each month, when traders from Myanmar, Thailand, China and Laos gather to buy and sell their wares. Many different hill tribes, particularly the Akha, descend on the town on these days.

Most visitors to Xieng Kok are more interested in taking a boat down the Mekong to Huay Xai. See below for more details.

Some travellers stop off at **Muang Long**, a heavily Akha district a little more than halfway to Xieng Kok from Muang Sing. There are some very good forest walks near Muang Long, especially along the Nam Long.

Sleeping & Eating

In Xieng Kok, the **Xieng Kok Resort** (r US\$5) sits on a hill and boasts simple but comfortable wooden bungalows on stilts. Not far from the boat landing, **Kaemkhong Guest House** (r US\$3) offers basic rattan-walled rooms with shared facilities. Two restaurants in Xieng Kok serve simple but remarkably good Lao food for the location.

In Muang Long, **Jony** (r US\$3) has simple rooms with private squat toilet and cold-water bathrooms attached, **Ounseng** (r US\$3-4) has rooms with and without private bathrooms, and **Thatsany** (r US\$3) has similarly basic rooms with attached bathrooms.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

The journey from Muang Sing to Huay Xai via Xieng Kok is a chop-and-change affair that can be more trouble than it's worth. Transport from Muang Sing is straightforward (see *sáwngháew* below), but once in Xieng Kok you are largely limited to speedboat charter down to Huay Xai. Holding up to six passengers, these cost in the vicinity of US\$150. The journey takes four hours and, like all speedboat travel in Laos, is risky (see the boxed text, p219).

The alternative is to hang around Xieng Kok for a few days in the hope of hitching a ride with a slow boat, or chartering one. Chinese traders operate them and if you can negotiate passage (be prepared to pay around US\$100 for the eight- to 10-hour journey) it's a beautiful trip. Something to

be aware of is that these boats often dock in Thailand, which would entail you entering Thailand without having passed through Laos immigration.

Via Muang Mom & Ton Pheung

You can get better rates by asking for a speedboat to Muang Mom rather than Huay Xai. Muang Mom, about two hours downriver, is a large speedboat depot near the point where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet. All boats must stop here anyway to allow Lao immigration and customs officers to check everyone's papers.

A speedboat from Xieng Kok to Muang Mom costs around US\$15 per person (assuming there are six passengers), and another speedboat on to Huay Xai – just 1½ hours further downriver – will cost around US\$6 per person.

Another way to reach Huay Xai is to catch a speedboat to Ton Pheung (US\$10 per person or US\$60 charter), the Lao town opposite Chiang Saen. From Ton Pheung you can catch a bus onward to Huay Xai (US\$1.50), along a decent graded road.

SÄWNGTHÄEW

A graded, unsealed road extends 72km from Muang Sing to Xieng Kok (US\$2, two hours, three daily).

PHONGSALI PROVINCE

Enclosed on three sides by China and Vietnam, Phongsali is a visual feast, kept pristine by arduous journeys and unwieldy terrain. The road north from Udomxai ribbons around infinite hills; their lush counterparts cascading into the distance beyond the line of sight. In parts the forest is so congested that vines and trees clamour on top of each other in competitive and glorious mayhem. Tiny *bâan* appear around random bends, tumbling down dusty slopes, and villagers are still a little flummoxed at the sight of foreigners. This will change if road conditions ever improve, but for now this neck of the country remains relatively remote to the tourist trail.

Phongsali's population density is just 9.4 per square kilometre, the lowest in the country after Sekong and Attapeu Provinces. Twenty-two ethnicities make up the prov-

ince's population of approximately 166,000, among them Kheu, Sila, Lolo, Hanyi, Hmong, Pala, Oma, Eupa, Loma, Pusang, Mien, Akha, Haw, Thai Dam, Thai Khao, Thai Lü, Phuan, Khamu, Phai, Vietnamese and Yunnanese. The Phu Noi (recognisable by their white leggings) are by far the most numerous, followed by the Thai Lü, Haw, Akha and Khamu. As in Udomxai and Luang Nam Tha, the Chinese presence has increased steeply with recent road and construction development. In fact Chinese-style tea continues to replace poppy farms as a significant cash crop.

Phongsali's Phu Den Din NPA covers 1310 sq km in the northeastern corner of the province along the Lao-Vietnamese border, adjacent to Vietnam's Muong Nhe Nature Reserve. Mountains in this area reach up to 1948m and bear 77% primary forest cover. Many threatened or endangered mammals live in the area, including elephant, tiger, clouded leopard, banteng, gaur and Asiatic black bear. Access to Phu Den Din remains difficult due to the lack of roads, and there are as yet no guided treks to the NPA.

The best areas for hill-tribe village exploration are found in the extreme northwest corner of the province, where there are also few roads. Reaching this area involves walking two or more days; guides are available in Phongsali.

PHONGSALI

ພົງສາລີ

☎ 088 / pop 25,000 / elevation 1400m

Sitting high on a mountainous platform on the steep slopes of Phou Fa (1626m), the provincial capital of the north is a petite town with one of the most colourful populations in the country. About 70% of the population is Phu Noi, but modernity has begun its steady trickle, and stoic Phu Noi women carrying ungainly loads on their backs totter alongside cell phone-clad Chinese and brand-new 4WDs. The town remains dormant until around 10am, when vendors open their wooden shutters and the streets suddenly teem with spirited schoolchildren keen to practise their English, or simply offer a shy *sabqi-dii*. It's an enchanting place to hang the boots for a while and observe.

Phongsali possesses a year-round cool climate that comes as a welcome relief during the hotter season (March to May). In

fact, the climate is closer to what you find in northern Vietnam than in much of Laos. It can be quite cold during the cool season, with temperatures as low as 5°C at night and 10°C during the day. Fog and low clouds are common in the morning at any time of year. Rainfall can be intense and cold. Be sure to bring a pullover, jacket and waterproofs, even in March, April and May, just in case.

Information

Lao Development Bank Can change US dollars, Thai baht or Chinese yuan (but no travellers cheques) for kip.

Lao Telecom Office Cardphone available.

Post office Across the road from the Telecom Office.

Sights

The **Museum of Tribes** (admission US\$0.20; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) displays locally curated exhibits on the Phongsali Province's diverse cultures.

If you wander through the town's backstreets and alleys you'll find some interesting old Phu Noi (similar to Tibetan) and Chinese brick-and-wood architecture.

The hike to the top of **Phou Fa** is glorious, if punishing, but the 400-odd stone steps are mercifully interrupted by shady rest areas. Towards the top is a grassy plateau with picnic tables and a carer's residence – you need to pay him US\$0.30/0.50/1 per person/camera/video camera to climb the remaining steps to the summit. The dramatic views from the top show the town dissipating into a hazy, hilly film.

Activities

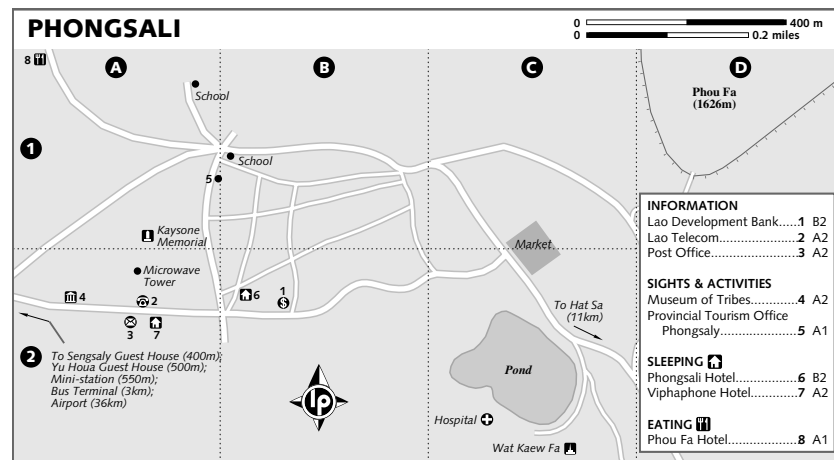
Trekking is a highlight in Laos' northernmost province, and the intrepid will be rewarded with some of the least affected landscape and villages in Indochina.

The **Provincial Tourism Office Phongsali** (☎ 210098; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) is actually a small room within the 'Organisation of People Prosecutor Provincial Phongsali' building. Staffed by exceptionally friendly staff with reasonable English, it arranges one- to five-day treks in the surrounding hills. Accommodation is in Akha and Up Noi villages, which receive about 50% of your fee. Like those in Luang Nam Tha, these tours have a heavy emphasis on ecological and cultural sensitivity, and the office equips trekkers with the information they need to tread lightly. The cost depends on the size of the group and duration of a trek, but for an indication, a one-day trek for one person costs US\$25, and for the maximum size group of six it costs US\$12 per person.

Sleeping

Yu Houa Guest House (210186; r US\$3-5) This friendly Phu Noi-owned guesthouse near the bus terminal has plain but clean rooms. Those on the top floor have cold-water showers and Western toilets and those on the lower levels share squat toilet bathrooms.

Sengsaly Guest House (☎ 210165; r US\$3-5) This small and simple guesthouse has rudimentary rooms with mosquito nets and attached bathrooms containing squat toilets



and scoop showers. Each room has complimentary Lao tea and the beds are dressed in warm covers.

Phongsali Hotel (☎ 412042; r with/without bathroom US\$3/5) The Chinese-built Phongsali Hotel, in a centrally located four-storey building, has austere but bright rooms owing to large windows – the upper storey rooms afford decent views. Most rooms have three beds and the most expensive have hot water. The whole place could do with a scrubbing, but it's tidy. The staff are indifferent though.

Viphaphone Hotel (☎ 210111; r US\$6) The three-storey Viphaphone offers good value with spacious sunny rooms packing Western-style bathrooms and glorious hot-water showers. They make a good stab at furnishing the rooms with coffee tables, wardrobes and even hat stands. Try to get a corner room for 180-degree views of the street below from the sizable windows.

HAT SA

If you get stuck in Hat Sa, a stopover for visitors heading to Phongsali via boat, **Wanna Guesthouse** (tr US\$3) has three-bed rooms with floor mattresses and mosquito nets above a family home.

Eating

Yu Houa Guest House restaurant (☎ 210186; meals US\$0.50-2; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The ground floor of this guesthouse is devoted to an airy restaurant serving filling and cheap fare. The menu has excellent Lao-Yunnan dishes and a modicum of stodgy Western fare.

Phongsali Hotel (☎ 412042; meals US\$1-2.50; ☺ lunch & dinner) The restaurant here has a reasonable menu with ubiquitous *tôm yám* and stir-fries, plus a good selection of regional specialities like sweet sausage. You can choose between Beerlao and Beer China to wash it all down. It's a sunny space during the day, although you have to share the ambience with Chinese soap operas on the TV. At night it thuds out lurid pop and if you join the modest crowd you're sure to be the main event.

Phou Fa Hotel (☎ 412057; meals US\$1.50-2.50; ☺ dinner) This reformed army barracks once moonlighted as a hotel but all that remains now is a concrete bunker of a bar and restaurant. The aesthetics are a little odd, but the fireplace keeps things cosy and the

food is good. The menu offers stir fries for the tame and authentic Lao dishes for the adventurous.

There are several noodle shops on the main street through town towards the market. Chinese beer is cheap all over town, while Beerlao is relatively expensive. The local *lào-lào* is tinted green with herbs and is quite a smooth tippie. Good Chinese-style tea is also available.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lao Airlines (☎ 210794; Boun Neua airport) operates a Y-12 to/from Vientiane (one way/return US\$92/175, 1½ hours, Thursday and Sunday) to Boun Neua, about 36km west of Phongsali on Rte 1B (the main road). You then need to wait for the bus heading to Phongsali from Udomxai, which arrives anywhere between 4pm and 6pm and costs US\$5. You may also find a *sáwngháew* to do the trip for a similar fare.

BOAT

Hat Sa can be reached by boat along the Nam Ou from Muang Khua. In Muang Khua you can choose between slow boats (US\$10, six hours) and speedboats (US\$13, three hours, departures depend on passenger demand). Either type of boat may be chartered from Muang Khua to Hat Sa for US\$80 to US\$100, carrying up to 15 passengers in a slow boat or six passengers in a speedboat. Bear in mind, however, that river traffic is sporadic and you may need to wait a day or two for passage. When the river level is low, particularly from March to May, the boat service may be cancelled altogether.

BUS & 4WD

There is one bus daily to/from Udomxai (US\$6, eight to 12 hours, 8am). The Phongsali bus terminal is about 3km west of town; if you don't fancy walking you can catch a *sáwngháew* (US\$0.30 to US\$0.50 depending on the number of passengers and your bargaining skills) from a ministration about 50m west of Yu Houa Guest House (p211). Trucks to Hat Sa (US\$7, one hour) also leave from this mini-station between 7am and 7.30am daily.

Hat Sa

From the boat landing at the small town of Hat Sa, passengers can share a 4WD vehi-

cle (US\$1.50 per person, US\$15 charter) for the 20km journey along an unsealed road to Phongsali.

Mengla (China)

If the Yunnan–Phongsali border should open to foreign travellers in the future (it is currently open to Chinese and Lao nationals only), it will be easier to reach Phongsali from Mengla (in Yunnan), than from most points in Laos. From the Lao settlement of Ban Pakha (a village of Akha refugees who fled the communist takeover of China in the 1940s), near the Chinese border, to Phongsali you could take a bus to Boun Neua, where you would change to another bus for the final leg to Phongsali.

UDOMXAI TO PHONGSALI

Sixty-two kilometres northeast of Udomxai, Rte 2E reaches a three-way junction at the village of Pak Nam Noi. From Pak Nam Noi, Rte 3 continues east-northeast to Muang Khua and to the Vietnamese border, while route 1B proceeds north-northeast to Phongsali.

From Udomxai to Pak Nam Noi about two-thirds of the road is now sealed, and before long this entire stretch will no doubt be sealed. On the way to Pak Nam Noi you'll pass through scenic **Muang La** (25km from Udomxai), a tidy Thai Lü village with a classic Thai Lü temple and a couple of restaurants built alongside a river.

In Pak Nam Noi the **Pak Nam Noy Guest House** (r US\$2), near the three-way junction, can provide a room if you miss a bus connection and become stranded here.

Roughly halfway between Udomxai and Phongsali, **Boun Tai** (60km from Udomxai) is a prospering Thai Lü town popular as a base for NGOs and as a rest-stop for people travelling to and from Phongsali. The **Khem Nam Lan** (r US\$2-4), **Boun Tai** (r US\$2-4) and **Hong Thong** (r US\$2-4) guesthouses all offer decent accommodation. The Hong Thong prepares good Chinese food, while the slightly more elaborate River View Restaurant does Lao as well as Chinese.

Two- to three-day treks into the Nam Lan Conservation area and surrounding Thai Yang, Akha and Thai Lü villages can be organised through the District Tourism Office, which you can find at the top of the hill next to the district administration office. Trek highlights, aside from pristine jungle and homestays in the villages, include Thai Lü temples and hot springs.

Next comes **Ban Yo** (30km from Boun Tai), where a turn to the left leads directly to **Ban Pakha** (19km) on the Chinese border and a turn right goes to **Boun Neua** (21km) and Phongsali. Although Boun Neua is essentially a Thai Lü village, the abundance of Chinese signs and the presence of a Chinese-style guesthouse and restaurant demonstrates the close connection with China, only 40km away. The bus from Udomxai stops in Boun Neua for a wee break, but long enough for everyone to trundle off. Make sure you don't confuse this with Phongsali, as it's a hefty 36km hike to Phongsali if you let the bus leave without you. Alternatively there's a decent guesthouse right next to the bus station if you do get stuck.

At Boun Neua the road forks into one road leading northeast to Phongsali (41km) or another heading north to **Ou Tai** (93km). Ou Tai is known to be a centre for several Phongsali Province hill tribes.

MUANG KHUA

ເມືອງຂວາ

☎ 081 / pop 20,000

Muang Khua is a small but thriving trading town that climbs from the banks of the Nam Ou in a jumble of shacks and concrete. It sits at the junction of the Nam Ou and Rte 1A, which connects Udomxai and Phongsali Provinces with Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese and Chinese people have migrated here to do business and it's growing steadily as a result.

Although Muang Khua is not much of a destination in itself, a quick walk around town will reveal a few older French colonial buildings amid the growing number of cement shophouses. A stroll across the old wood-plank and steel-cable suspension bridge over the Nam Phak, a Nam Ou tributary, affords some good river and mountain views and leads to the Khamu village of Ban Na Tum.

The Lao Development Bank here can change US dollars, Thai baht and Chinese yuan (cash only) for kip. Electric power comes on nightly from 6.30pm to 10pm.

There have been rumours that the Lao–Vietnamese border, around 55km east of Muang Khua, will someday be open to international travellers. When it does, this route will surely become popular among those travelling to or from Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. The border town on the Lao

side is called Tai Xang; on the Vietnamese side it's Tay Trang. At present the only way to reach the Vietnamese border is by tug across the Nam Ou, although the influx of trade may result in a bridge spanning the relatively short divide.

Sleeping & Eating

Singsavanh Guest House (r US\$3) In a convenient spot right outside the bus station, this simple property has rudimentary rooms with shared bathrooms.

Nam Ou Guest House & Restaurant (r US\$5, with-out bathroom US\$3/5) This rambling and homely guesthouse overlooks the boat landing and has pleasant, clean rooms upstairs, some with attached hot shower and squat toilets. There are also a few rooms downstairs although they're squalid in comparison. The restaurant (meals US\$0.50 to US\$1.50) has good river views and a basic menu. The friendly owner speaks French and English. You can reach the guesthouse from the town's main road or from the main boat landing.

Keophila Guest House (☎ 210907; r US\$4) This central guesthouse on the main drag has fresh rooms with private bathrooms. Unfortunately the rigid beds are murder on the back, and it's often full. The bar next door serves a seemingly permanent crowd with a seemingly endless supply of Beerlao.

Sernnaly Hotel (☎ 212445; r US\$10) This central, Chinese-built hotel is a huge leap from all other accommodation in town. Immaculate rooms have attached Western bathrooms, hospital-clean sheets on the beds and plenty of space. The downstairs restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$3) serves Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and Lao food, but you need to give advance notice.

Other than the restaurants at the Nam Ou Guest House and Sernnaly Hotel, you'll find the usual crop of noodle stands at the market near the bus terminal.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

When the river level is high enough, you can reach Muang Khua via boat on the Nam Ou. See Luang Prabang (p156), Nong Khiaw (p161) and Muang Ngoi Neua (p164). See Phongsali (p212) for details on boat travel from Muang Khua to Hat Sa, 20km north of Phongsali.

BUS

The bus terminal next to the town market fields morning buses to/from Udomxai (US\$4, four hours, two daily) and Luang Prabang (US\$6, eight hours, two daily).

To get to Phongsali you need to catch a *sáwngtháew* to Pak Nam Noi (US\$2, one hour, 8am) and then wait for the bus that passes through from Udomxai at around 10am. The bus journey from Pak Nam Noi to Phongsali costs US\$4.80 and takes seven to 10 hours including frequent stops.

BOKEO PROVINCE

Laos's smallest and second least populous province, wedged between the Mekong River border with Thailand and the border with Myanmar, has a population of just 145,000. The river defines much of Bokeo's character – bringing trade and tourists in from Thailand and China. Huay Xai gets the lion's share, but villages nearby hold archaeological and cultural gems, and are deserving of exploration. Moreover it's a good launching pad for journeys to Luang Nam Tha and Udomxai.

In earlier times Bokeo was known as Hua Khong (Head of the Mekong); its current name means 'Gem Mine', a reference to minor sapphire deposits in Huay Xai district. Despite its diminutive size, Bokeo harbours 34 ethnicities, the second-highest number of ethnic groups per province (after Luang Nam Tha) in the country. They include Lao Huay (Lanten), Khamu, Akha, Hmong, Mien, Kui, Phai, Lamet, Samtao, Tahoy, Shan, Phu Thai, Thai Dam, Thai Khao, Thai Daeng, Thai Lü, Phuan, Thai Nai, Ngo, Kalom, Phuvan, Musoe (Lahu) and Chinese people. Bokeo is the only Lao province with a significant population of Lahu, a hill tribe common in northern Myanmar and Thailand.

HUAY XAI

ຫ້ວຍຂ້າຍ

☎ 084 / pop 15,500

This bustling river port on the Mekong is in a slow and steady state of flux, encouraged by tourist dollars and Thai, Lao and Chinese trade. The crux of town only spans a few hundred metres and the main street is a strip of guesthouses, shops and tour op-

erators. Once you head a kilometre or so in either direction, however, you'll find yourself in sleepy *bàan* populated by friendly residents. The rich green hills of Bokeo rise in the background and the mighty Mekong, intrinsic to the town's character, forms a natural border with Thailand. Most visitors head here solely for the opportunity to take a slow boat journey on the Mekong (see p218), or to head north, but Huay Xai has managed to remain relaxed and to avoid the hassle common to pit stops and border towns. This makes for some pleasant ambulating. It's also a good base for trips into Bokeo Province itself.

For centuries Huay Xai was a disembarkation point for Yunnanese caravans led by the Hui (Chinese Muslims) on their way to Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai in ancient Siam; today Chinese barges from Yunnan are able to navigate this far, so there is still a brisk trade in Chinese goods.

Information

Lao Development Bank (☎ 8am-3.30pm Mon-Fri)

Also has an exchange booth at the immigration and

customs office near the ferry pier. US dollars, travellers cheques or cash in baht and Japanese yen can be changed for kip at either location, but not vice versa.

Khaenlao Tours (Th Saykhong) Travel agent selling boat tickets and tours around Bokeo.

Phoudoi Travel Co (Th Saykhong) Boat tickets and tours to Lanten and Khamu villages.

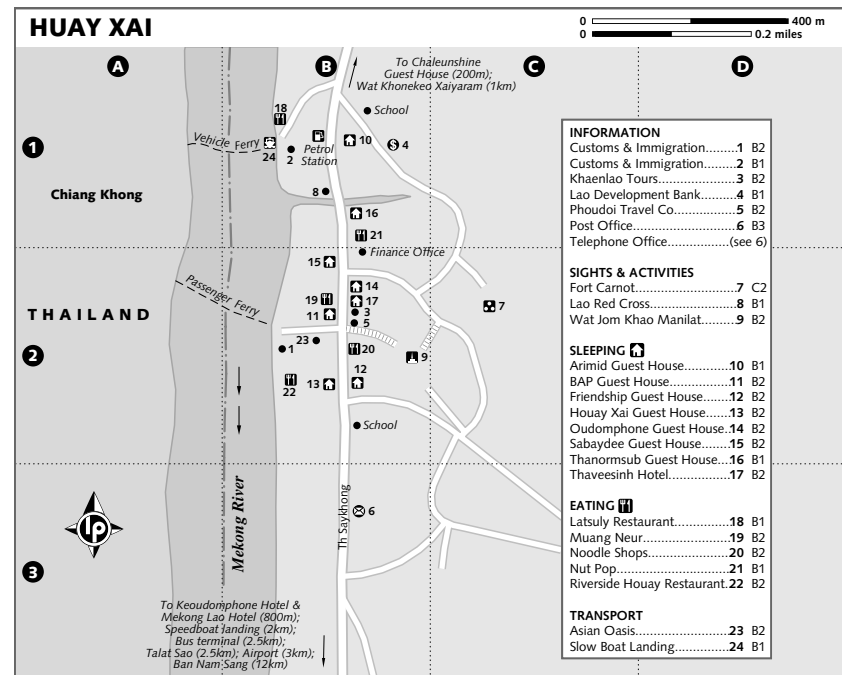
Post office (Th Saykhong) Also contains a telephone office open 8am to 10pm.

Dangers & Annoyances

When arriving in Huay Xai from Thailand there's an official-looking desk at the boat landing. Men here will do their best to convince you that there's no bus to Luang Nam Tha (this is false) and try to sell you a ticket along the Mekong to Luang Prabang for the next day. They may also try to sell you an overpriced ticket along the Nam Tha, up to Luang Nam Tha. It pays to walk past them and find out your best options once you're in town.

Sights & Activities

A set of *naga* stairs ascends from a point not far from the ferry landing to **Wat Jom Khao**



Manilat, a thriving temple that overlooks the town and river. Constructed in 1880, the teak Shan-style temple houses a 1458 stele donated by a former Chiang Khong prince. Many of the brightly coloured Jataka paintings that decorate the exterior of the *sim* were sponsored by Lao refugees who had been repatriated from the US.

It's worth walking the short distance north to **Wat Khonekeo Xaiyaram** in Ban Khone Keo. The lavish frontage has magnificent gold, green and red pillars and doors. It's also in a peaceful setting, with banks of green hills rising in the background.

French-built, high-walled **Fort Carnot**, atop an adjacent hill and clearly visible from the Thai side of the Mekong, is occupied by Lao troops and is off limits to visitors.

Huay Xai's main morning market, **Talat Sao** (Th Saykhong) attracts traders from numerous ethnic backgrounds and is situated at the southern end of town near the bus terminal.

You can take a traditional herbal sauna and/or Swedish-Lao massage at the **Lao Red Cross** (☎ 211264; Th Saykhong; sauna US\$1, massage per hr US\$3; ☎ 4-8.30pm).

Sleeping

Most hotels and guesthouses in Huay Xai quote their rates in Thai baht.

Houay Xai Guest House (Th Saykhong; r US\$2.50-3) An older two-storey place with wooden floors and a nice little seating area that overlooks the river. The fan-cooled rooms are tight, tidy and accommodating.

Friendship Guest House (☎ 211219; Th Saykhong; sUS\$3, d US\$5-10) Friendship lives up to its name with friendly, efficient service. The small but neat rooms have slightly dank bathrooms but windows, wooden floors and a nice rooftop view compensate.

BAP Guest House (☎ 211083; Th Saykhong; s/d US\$3/6) Turn left coming from the pier, and BAP is 50m up on the left. All rooms come with fan and hot-water shower. This friendly two-storey place is a good spot to find out about boats going to Luang Nam Tha via Pak Tha or Xieng Kok. There's also a good restaurant downstairs.

Thanormsub Guest House (☎ 211095; Th Saykhong; r US\$5) One of the best deals in town, this single-storey guesthouse has fresh rooms with ceiling fans and hot-water showers attached. It's low-key, immaculate and extremely friendly.

Arimid Guest House (Alimit; ☎ 211040; fax 312006; Ban Huay Xai Neua; r US\$5.50-13; ☎) This is a collection of thatched bamboo bungalows with attached hot-water showers. The most expensive versions also have air-con. The husband-and-wife owners speak French and English. The pier for slow boats going to Pak Beng and Luang Prabang is only about 200m away.

Oudomphone Guest House (r US\$5) This guesthouse is a spotless option with fan-cooled rooms, clean sheets and surfaces and friendly owners. It's slightly tucked off the main street and good for a quiet night's sleep. There's a small café out the front serving good breakfasts (US\$1).

Keoudomphone Hotel (☎ 211405; Th Saykhong; r US\$5-10; ☎) The nicest hotel in town is a 15-minute walk from the main strip but it's well worth the effort for the spick, span and spacious rooms. Each has a TV, small couches and plenty of charm and sunlight. Pricier rooms have air-con.

Sabaydee Guest House (☎ 211751; Th Saykhong; r US\$6) A good cut above the cheaper options in town, this immaculate guesthouse has pristine rooms with firm beds, large windows and commodious hot-water bathrooms. It's efficiently run and recommended.

Thaveesinh Hotel (☎/fax 312039; Th Saykhong; r US\$6.50-16; ☎) This grand pink structure contains an assortment of rooms ranging from cosy, fan-cooled versions to capacious suites with air-con. All have TV, hot water and garish bedspreads. It's not as clean as some of the guesthouses but you're paying for the amenities.

Mekong Lao Hotel (☎ 211277; r US\$7.50; ☎) Opposite the Keoudomphone, this hotel has a promising exterior and although the rooms are large and comfy, they're pretty musty. They all have air-con and TVs though and are decent for the price.

Chaleunshine Guest House (☎ 212076; Th Saykhong; r US\$10) Its short distance from town puts this lovely guesthouse in a more authentic *bàan* location. Rooms are breezy and bright, with spotless tiled floors and hot-water showers in the bathrooms.

Eating

Nut Pop (☎ 211037; Th Saykhong; meals US\$1-3; ☎ lunch & dinner) On an atmospheric timber deck surrounded by foliage, this restaurant serves great Lao dishes like peppery hot pork, baked fish or chicken with chilli and lime.

PAÀ BÉUK

The Mekong River stretch that passes Huay Xai was until recently an important fishing ground for the giant Mekong catfish (*pqa béuk* in Lao, *Pangasianodon gigas* to ichthyologists), probably the largest freshwater fish in the world. A *pqa béuk* takes at least six and possibly up to 12 years (no-one's really sure) to reach full size, when it will measure 2m to 3m in length and weigh up to 300kg. Locals say these fish swim all the way from Qinghai Province (where the Mekong originates) in northern China. In Thailand and Laos its flesh is considered a major delicacy; the texture is very meaty but it has a delicate flavour, similar to that of tuna or swordfish.

These fish are only taken between mid-April and May when the river depth is between 3m and 4m and the fish are swimming upriver to spawn in Lake Tali in Yunnan Province, China. Before netting them, Thai and Lao fishers hold a annual ceremony to propitiate Chao Mae Paa Beuk, a female deity thought to preside over the giant Mekong catfish. Among the rituals comprising the ceremony are chicken sacrifices performed aboard the fishing boats. After the ceremony is completed, fishing teams draw lots to see who casts the first net, and then they take turns casting.

The annual catch has dwindled to almost nothing in recent years, a situation thought due to Chinese blasting of Mekong River rapids to the north. The blasting is intended to make the Mekong more navigable but it has also destroyed the underwater caves that serve as natural nurseries for the giant catfish. When a catch is made, fisherfolk sell the meat on the spot for US\$40 or more per kilogram (a single fish can bring up to US\$5000 in Bangkok), most of which ends up in restaurants in Bangkok or Kunming, since local restaurants in Huay Xai and Chiang Khong can't afford such prices; transport to Vientiane is considered too costly.

Because of the danger of extinction, Thailand's Inland Fisheries Department has been taking protective measures since 1983, including a breed-and-release programme. Every time a female is caught, it's kept alive until a male is netted, then the eggs are removed (by massaging the female's ovaries) and put into a pan; the male is then milked for sperm and the eggs are fertilised in the pan. In this fashion over a million *pqa béuk* have been released into the Mekong since the experiment began. Although the results of releasing *pqa béuk* into the wild have been very mixed, the domestic farming of *pqa béuk* in central and northern Thailand has been very successful. This means that farms on both sides of the border may one day be able to breed the fish for local consumption for little more than the cost of feed.

Latsuly Restaurant (meals US\$1.50-2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right next to the slow boat landing, this spot overlooking the Mekong serves an assortment of fried noodle and rice dishes, buffalo steaks, and a good basil pork. It can also whip up sandwiches for you to take on the boats.

Muang Neur (Th Saykhong; meals US\$1.50-3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) There's plenty of fragrant Lao cuisine to be had at this humble little restaurant, like whole crisp fried fish stuffed with ginger and garlic, spicy seafood soup with lemongrass, and delicious *jôe*. It also advertises itself as the Gecko Bar for those in need of *lào-lào*.

Riverside Houay Restaurant (off Th Saykhong; meals US\$1.50-3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The only thing broader than the Mekong view at this restaurant is the menu. A huge array of Thai and Lao is on offer with some good seafood dishes including fried prawn cakes. The *tôm yám* and curries come in all man-

ner of meats, or you can just tuck into an omelette. It has a particularly ambient setting, although the cheesy Thai pop music detracts a little from it.

At night spontaneous noodle shops and barbeques spring up on Th Saykhong and you can dine for around US\$1.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Huay Xai's airport of US construction lies a few kilometres south of town. **Lao Airlines** (☎ 211026, 211494) flies to/from Vientiane (one way/return US\$84/160, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday).

BOAT

Huay Xai is a major jumping-off point for visitors planning to travel downriver to Luang Prabang by boat. It's also possible to travel upriver to Xieng Kok (see p209), where a road leads to Muang Sing.

CROSSING THE THAI BORDER AT HUAY XAI & CHIANG KHONG

The small town of Chiang Khong, in Thailand's Chiang Rai Province, sits on the Mekong River opposite Huay Xai, Laos. The main boat landing for international crossing is Tha Bak, at the northern end of Chiang Khong. After you've legally exited Thailand via the small Thai **customs & immigration post** at the landing, you can board a longtail boat (one way US\$1, five minutes, 8am to 6pm) to Huay Xai. On the Huay Xai side, the Lao immigration post is alongside the pedestrian ferry landing. Thirty-day tourist visas are available on arrival for US\$30. There is an additional US\$1 overtime charge from 4pm to 6pm weekdays and all weekend.

If you're crossing in your own car or truck, you'll use the huge vehicle ferry (US\$50) that lands at the northern end of Huay Xai.

Plans to construct a bridge from Chiang Khong to Huay Xai by late 1997 were derailed by the economic crash but it's only a matter of time before a span makes the ferry crossing obsolete.

Slow Boats

Long-distance ferries – the *héua sáa* (slow boat) – travel down the Mekong from Huay Xai to Pak Beng (US\$9.50, six to eight hours) and Luang Prabang (US\$20, two days). Some travellers rave about this journey, others are disappointed. The river is indeed very beautiful, but your experience will depend largely on the condition of the boat and number of fellow passengers. The boats should hold around 70 people, but many captains pack in more than 100, and spending two days in an engine room like cattle isn't much to write home about. It's worth noting, however, that there is strength in numbers, and if passengers refuse, en masse, to travel in an overcrowded boat then captains have been known to relent and agree to two boats.

The journey generally requires an overnight stay in Pak Beng, unless you charter your own boat (US\$500). If you can pull a crowd together this latter option is a good one as you'll have much more room. Departure times for slow boats depend largely on passenger demand, but they usually leave between 8am and 11am each morning. Be sure to carry a cushion if you have a sensitive bum, as the wooden seats can be uncomfortable and the boats are very crowded during the high season.

Several different kinds of slow boats make the journey from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang, and it's a good idea to have a look at the boat in advance. The photos of beautifully maintained vessels you'll be shown at the tour agencies in town don't bear any resemblance to the boats you'll end up on. Other boats have better seating, and so on. The situation is constantly changing, but BAP Guest House (p216) is a good source of

info on how to select the better boats. Tour agencies and most guesthouses sell tickets but you can purchase them for a couple of bucks less from the **ticket office** (☎ 212012) at the slow boat landing, which is located north of the town centre.

You can also book a slow boat in advance, in Chiang Khong, before crossing to Huay Xai, for a surcharge of US\$2.50. In the high season this is worth considering, as boats fill very fast.

You can also cruise to Pak Beng and Luang Prabang on the large, comfortably outfitted *Luang Say*, a 34m, 36-seat, steel-hulled boat operated by **Asian Oasis** (www.asian-oasis.com; per person May-Sep/Oct-Apr US\$185/270) three days weekly in each direction (two weekly May to September). The two-day package includes meals, guides and a night at Luang Say Lodge in Pak Beng (see p194). The office is near immigration. Asian Oasis also has an office in Luang Prabang (see p148).

Phoudoi Travel Co (Th Saykhong) sells tickets for a comfortable, 34m boat with chairs, tables and food and drink on board. Tickets are US\$60 and the boat takes one day to reach Luang Prabang. Departures are every Monday and Friday. You can also book this from Thailand; see www.chiangsaenriverhill.com for details.

Speedboats

Six-passenger *héua wái* (speedboats) to Pak Beng (US\$14, three hours) and Luang Prabang (US\$28, six hours) leave from a landing about 2km south of the town centre. You can hire a whole boat for four to six times the individual fare.

BAP Guest House (p216) can arrange speedboats to Xieng Kok for US\$150 for

up to four passengers. From Xieng Kok it's possible to travel by road to Muang Sing in Luang Nam Tha; see p209 for more information on this journey.

Bear in mind that although the speedboat is much quicker, it's a noisy, cramped and risky ride. See below for warnings on travelling by speedboat.

BUS & SĀWNGTHĀEW

The road northeast to Luang Nam Tha can be difficult because of its poor surface, but it is slowly being upgraded.

Buses and large *sāwngthāew* ply the road northeast to Vieng Phoukha (US\$4.50, five hours, three to four daily), Luang Nam Tha (US\$6.50, eight hours, three daily) and Udomxai (US\$10, 11 hours, one daily).

There are also daily buses to Luang Prabang (US\$13, eight hours) and Vientiane (US\$17, 18 hours).

These time estimates apply only during dry months; during the rainy season the road can be very slow, occasionally even impassable for a day or two. A bandanna is handy for dust protection in the dry season. When the upgrading project is done, the road will be traversable year-round and buses should be able to make the Huay Xai–Nam Tha trip in four to six hours.

The bus terminal is about 2.5km south of town, a tuk-tuk there costs US\$1.

AROUND HUAY XAI

Various hill-tribe villages can be visited from Huay Xai, some of them within walking distance and others a short drive north or south of town. One that everyone seems to know about is the Lao Huay village of **Ban Nam Sang**. It's less than an hour east by *sāwngthāew* – 17km to be exact – and you can either charter a pick-up truck from the morning market in Huay Xai for about US\$6 each way, or catch the regular morning *sāwngthāew* from the same market at around 8am or 8.30am for US\$0.60 per person. If you go it's best to check in with the *phūu nyai bāan* (village headman) first.

A reminder: do not bring sweets, T-shirts, pharmaceuticals or any other such items to give away to the villagers as this 'generosity' threatens to interfere with their traditional way of life, and worse, threatens to foster a culture of dependency and turn Ban Nam Sang into a village of beggars. If you feel strongly about contributing to the community you might offer the headman a small monetary contribution to be used for the village school.

Phoudoi Travel Co and Khaenlao Tours in Huay Xai (see p215) can organise one-day tours to Lanten and Khamu villages along the Mekong for US\$8 to US\$30 per person, depending on group size. An increasingly popular tour is the car-and-boat trip to **Sou-vannakhomkham** in Ton Pheng. This ancient

DANGER, WILL ROBINSON

Will Robinson had an unhappy knack of finding danger, but the robot would have been screaming warnings if he'd seen the speedboats that ply this stretch of the Mekong and the Nam Ou in Luang Prabang Province. Known locally as *héua wái* (literally 'fast boat', usually translated 'speedboat' or 'jetboat' in English), these things are little more than surfboards with car engines on the back.

The comfort of passengers wasn't high on the list of design imperatives. The seats are numbingly uncomfortable and the motors run without modern luxuries like mufflers, so they are deafeningly loud. This noise not only makes the trip even less enjoyable, but it's disturbing to both animal and human life along the riverbanks.

Lack of comfort aside, speedboats are genuinely dangerous. Serious accidents, sometimes including fatalities, are alarmingly common. Usually they involve a boat striking a hidden rock or a tree limb, although occasionally contact with a standing wave is enough to capsize these light craft. Because they're going so fast a simple capsize may have serious consequences for the passengers.

Although reliable statistics are unavailable, our own observation is that the accident risk for this type of boat outweighs the potential savings in time they may represent over slower boat alternatives. So considering safety, comfort and aural disturbance, we recommend you avoid speedboat travel unless absolutely necessary.

LAO HUAY

Also known as Lene Tene, Lenten or Laen Taen (Dressed in Blue), the Lao Huay (Lao Stream) are classified by the government as Lao Soung despite the fact they do not – and never have – lived anywhere other than lower river valleys. Ethnolinguistically they fall within the Hmong-Mien family, most of whom live at higher elevations.

The Lao Huay build their homes – multifamily longhouses of palm and bamboo thatch – beside rivers or streams from which they irrigate rice fields using simple wooden hydraulic pumps. Unlike the closely related Mien, they do not cultivate the opium poppy for trade, only for smoking. Lao Huay women can be identified by the single large coin (usually an old Indochina piastre, sometimes accompanied by several smaller coins) suspended over the parting in their long, straight hair and by their lack of eyebrows, which are completely depilated at age 15 according to custom. Both sexes favour dark blue or black clothes – baggy shirts and trousers – trimmed in red.

The Lao Huay use Chinese characters to write their language, often on handmade bamboo paper. Their belief system encompasses a mix of Taoism, ancestor worship and animism, with spirits attached to the family, house, village, sky, forest, earth, water and birds. Around 5000 Lao Huay live in Laos; in Bokeo Province they're mostly concentrated in Nam Nyun district. This tribe isn't found in Myanmar or Thailand, though there are some Lao Huay villages in Yunnan (China) and northern Vietnam.

city, which successively became known as Nakha Nakhorn or Nakhorn Xieng Lao, Nakhorn Ngeun Nyuang (Ngeun Nyang) Hiranya Nakhorn, and Nakhorn Xieng Saen (ancient), has over 40 archaeological sites, including temples, stupas, and a 7.22m-high Buddha image seated in the meditation posture. Looting has left Souvannakhomkham a fraction of its former splendour, but it's still worth the journey. Tours (US\$40 to US\$140 depending on group size) also take in waterfalls and lunch at a river village.

There's some worthwhile monkey business to be had north of Huay Xai off Rte 3 towards Luang Nam Tha. You'll hear about it on the traveller grapevine, but out of respect for the operators it's not listed in this book.

SAINYABULI PROVINCE

This upside-down-L-shaped province lying between Thailand to the west and Vientiane and Luang Prabang Provinces to the east is one of the most remote provinces in Laos, despite its geographic proximity to the nation's capital. Mountains – several higher than 1000m and one as high as 2150m – define the northern half of the province, where roads are scarce, while the southern half flattens into river plains.

Tourists seldom find themselves here, which is a shame because the journey from

Luang Prabang is a simple affair and the landscape is quite spectacular. Moreover, traversing Sainyabuli is a fascinating alternative to the well-trodden *jalang*-route of Luang Prabang–Vang Vieng–Vientiane.

Sainyabuli (also spelt Xaignabouri, Xayaboury, Saiyabouli and Sayabouri) shares a 645km border with six different Thai provinces. The province was the site of a brief but heated border skirmish between the Thai and Lao in 1988. More than 100 Thai and Lao soldiers died in battle before an agreement was reached and a compromise border was fixed.

The light population includes Lao, Thai Dam, Thai Lü, Khamu, Htin, Phai, Kri, Akha and Mabri; many of these groups migrate between Sainyabuli and Thailand, since the border is fairly unpoliced.

A string of rocky limestone precipices known as **Pha Xang** (Elephant Cliffs, so named because from a distance the grey-white cliffs resemble walking elephants) parallels the Mekong River on the eastern side of the province. Along the western edge of the province is the inaccessible **Nam Phoun NPA**, a 1150-sq-km tract of rugged, forested hills thought to sustain elephant, Sumatran rhino, gaur, gibbon, dhole, Asiatic black bear, Malayan sun bear and tiger.

The southern part of the province harbours several scenic waterfalls, including 150m Nam Tok Na Kha (3km from Ban Nakha), 105m Nam Tok Ban Kum (5km from Ban Kum)

and 35m Tat Heuang (40km from Ban Muang Phae). Unfortunately, none of these villages are easily accessible by road as yet, and this corner of the province is reputedly a hang-out for smugglers and possibly insurgents. It's probably best if travellers avoid the border area between Muang Ngoen (to the north) and Kaen Thao (to the south).

The 30m **Tat Jao**, a 1km walk northwest of the Mekong ferry crossing at Muang Tha Deua, is a popular local picnic spot.

Sainyabuli Province has more elephants than any other province in Laos. Two of the highest concentrations of working elephants can be found in Thong Mixai district about 40km northwest of Pak Lai at Hongsa, 85km north of the provincial capital.

SAINYABULI

ໄຂ່ຍະບູລີ

☎ 074 / pop 17,000

Sainyabuli is an unassuming town on the banks of the Nam Houng, a tributary of the Mekong River towards the northern end of Sainyabuli Province. Flanked by mountains and commonly shrouded in cloud in the

mornings, it has a handsome setting, enhanced no end by the lack of tourists here. Easy to explore on foot, Sainyabuli's lack of stereotypical attractions is precisely what makes it such a breath of fresh air. Very little English is spoken in Sainyabuli so be sure to pack your phrasebook.

Information

Lao Development Bank (☎ 8.30am–4pm Mon–Fri)

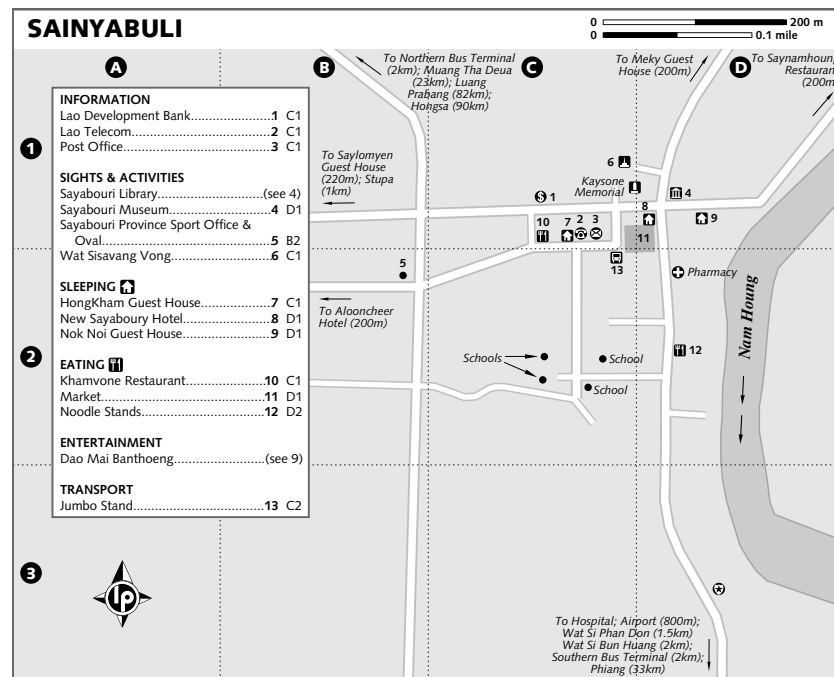
The bank accepts only cash (Thai baht or US dollars) at a lower rate than in Vientiane.

Lao Telecom (☎ 8am–10pm) You can buy international and domestic phonecards here or at the post office.

Post office (☎ 8–11am & 1–5pm Mon–Fri)

Sights

The grounds of **Wat Si Bun Huang**, south of town past the police station in an adjacent village, contain the brick foundations of Buddhist monuments rumoured to be over 500 years old. Nearby, **Wat Si Phan Don** contains an unusual diamond-shaped stupa with no known stylistic antecedents. In town, **Wat Sisavang Vong**, reportedly built by King Sisavang Vong on an older temple site, displays



a colourful version of Buddhist hell on its front walls.

At the western edge of town a lone **stupa** sits atop a column of steps with sweeping views of the town.

The tiny **Sayabouri Museum** sidles up to the **Sayabouri Library** on the main east–west street in town. Opening hours are sporadic and entry is by donation. In fact, if you can get in let us know.

Other visual treats include a spontaneous football match at the **Sayabouri Province Sport Office & Oval**, the fording and bathing ritual in the Nam Houng that takes place every afternoon, or being the main spectacle at the market.

Sleeping

HongKham Guest House (☎ 211381; s/d US\$5/10) Modest, spotless and very friendly, the HongKham has simple rooms with attached bathrooms. The whole lot is housed in a stone and wood villa and the owners are lovely.

Nok Noi Guest House (☎ 211122; s/d US\$5/10; 🏠) A decent cheapie, the Nok Noi has weary beds and covers, but tidy rooms with small windows and hot-water showers. It shares a plot of earth with the Dao Mai Banthoeng nightclub though (right) so things may get noisy at night.

Saylomyen Guest House (☎ 211156; r US\$6; 🏠) This immaculate guesthouse has something of a ranch exterior – the L-shaped structure has pure white walls and polished wooden doors with a pleasant veranda out front. Rooms are cosy and clean, and although the beds are a tad thin, it's excellent value.

Meky Guest House (☎ 2388399; r US\$8; 🏠) This lovely guesthouse is fabulous value, with hotel-sized rooms stocked with tiled floors, king-size beds, large bathrooms and cable TV. Rooms upstairs have screened windows and street views.

Alooncheer Hotel (☎ 213136; r US\$8; 🏠) In a quiet spot behind a fortress of security gates, this large hotel packs some classy punch. Moderately sized rooms are softly coloured and sunlit. Large beds, TVs, minibars and gleaming bathrooms are all the norm.

New Sayabouri Hotel (☎ 211116; r US\$15-17; 🏠) Not so new for quite some time now, this mammoth hotel has a grandiose front but close, overpriced rooms. The bedclothes are a bit drab and the bathrooms shambolic, although the tubs and air-con (in the pricier rooms) are plush.

Eating

Khamvone Restaurant (☎ 211103; meals US\$1-2; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This casual restaurant has a sunny setting with wooden picnic tables outside or low-slung wicker settings in the shade. It's menuless so you'll need your phrasebook, or you can simply point. The *foe* is great here.

Saynamhoung Restaurant (☎ 412109; meals US\$2.50-4; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This open-air, riverside spot has a nice atmosphere, good service and an extensive Lao, Thai and Chinese menu. You can test your culinary mettle on bowels or fried intestine...or steamed fish and prawn toast if you're not so game. Whatever you order the food is good and the Beerlao cold.

The cheapest and most interesting eats are to be had at the **market** (🕒 8am-6.30pm), where you can pick up takeaway noodles; peanut, rice and spring onion packages in lettuce, samosas, barbecued sausage and a whole host of unidentifiable goodies. You can feast for US\$0.50 to US\$1 and vendors will let you try before you buy.

There are also cheap noodle stands on the road to the airport.

Entertainment

Dao Mai Banthoeng (🕒 8-11.30pm) You might catch live bands playing Lao and Thai pop here during the week. Although slow on weeknights, it's very popular on weekends.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lao Airlines (☎ 412059; airport) advertises fares between Sainyabuli and Vientiane (one way/return US\$53/101), but this currently doesn't translate to actual flights. One day it might.

BOAT

Speedboats are available between Tha Deua and Luang Prabang (US\$10, one hour). From Tha Deua you can hop on a shared jumbo or *sāwngthāew* into Sainyabuli.

BUS & SĀWNGTHĀEW

A daily bus departs Luang Prabang's southern terminal for Sainyabuli (US\$4, five hours, 9am) and travels the partially paved road southwest to a landing at Pak Khon, on the Mekong's eastern bank near Muang Nan. From here, tugs pull vehicle barges across the Mekong. This is all included in your bus

fare and you don't even need to disembark. On the Sainyabuli side of the Mekong there is a passport inspection post where the bus may stop for five, or 30 minutes, depending on the number of foreigners. In general, however, it's not the overseas travellers they're most interested in. The bus then continues to Sainyabuli.

There is also a road running north to Sainyabuli from Kaen Thao, which is on the Nam Heuang opposite the Thai villages of Ban Pak Huay and Ban Nong Pheu – both are legal crossing points for Thai and Lao, but not for foreigners.

In Sainyabuli there are two bus terminals, one 2km southeast of town and one about the same distance northeast of town. Buses from Sainyabuli to Pak Lai leave from the southern terminal when there are enough passengers, usually between 7.30am and 10am (US\$3.50, three to four hours). Buses from the northern terminal head to Luang Prabang (US\$4, five hours, 9am and 3pm) and to Vientiane (US\$10, 15 hours, 11.30am and 4pm). Tuk-tuks leave from the jumbo stand throughout the day; to either terminal it costs US\$0.50.

AROUND SAINYABULI

Pak Lai

ປາກລາຍ
☎ 074

This small riverside community of old French colonial buildings and traditional wooden Lao homes clustered around a village green, with the Pha Xang mountain range as a scenic backdrop, makes a pleasant stopover between Sainyabuli and Vientiane.

A branch of Lao Development Bank can change US dollars and Thai baht to kip.

SLEEPING & EATING

Ban Na Guest House (☎ 211995; r US\$4) At this rather unusual three-storey guesthouse, where the bottom floor is cement, the middle one brick and the top one wood, the 17 rooms have screened windows and ceiling fans. Clean shower and toilet facilities are shared. Food can be ordered downstairs.

Lam Douan Guest House (r US\$4) Run by a friendly lady who speaks Lao, Thai and a little French, the Lam Douan offers 10 basic but clean rooms with shared bucket bath and toilet. The upper floor has a balcony with a Mekong view.

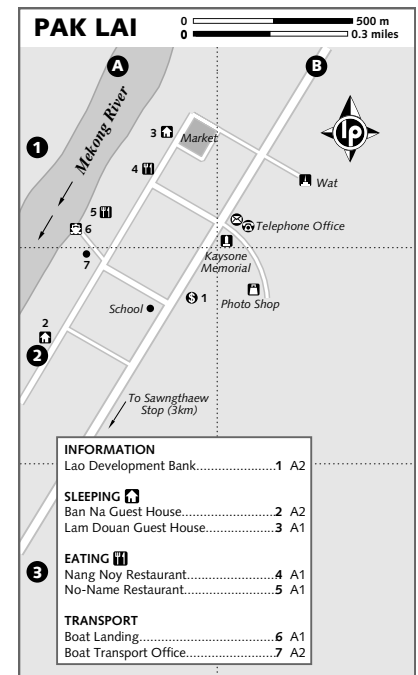
Nang Noy Restaurant (meals US\$0.50-1.50; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Between the boat landing and the market, Nang Noy specialises in simple rice and noodle dishes, and can do takeaway for the boat ride to Vientiane.

Right above the boat landing, a no-name restaurant in a clean, cement pavilion with tiled floors opens early in the morning to serve thick Lao coffee and *khào-nôm khuu* (Chinese-style fried pastry). Later in the day good rice and noodle dishes are available – this is a good spot to take in a Mekong sunset. The eatery doubles as a snack shop for the boat passengers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sāwngthāew travel between Pak Lai and Sainyabuli (US\$3.20, three hours, two daily). The *sāwngthāew* drops passengers off at a spot about 3km outside Pak Lai where you must continue by shared jumbo for US\$0.50 per person.

It's still possible to travel to Vientiane by slow boat along the Mekong (US\$10, seven to eight hours). Unlike other slow boat journeys in Laos, this one is a beautifully local, uncomfortable



THAI LÛ

Thai Lû dominate local culture and commerce in Hongsa district. Keen traders, they have been unusually successful in maintaining their traditions despite the pressures of outside Lao influence, while at the same time enjoying the relative prosperity that their district has developed as a Thailand-Laos trade centre.

The matrilineal Thai Lû practise a mix of Theravada Buddhism and animism; though traditionally endogamic (tending to marry within one's own clan) they've recently begun marrying outsiders – usually Thai Lû or Thai Neua from other districts. Women are said to enjoy greater political freedom and power than in most ethnic groups in Laos.

Typical Thai Lû villages are on the eastern bank of a stream or river, with at least one wat at the northern end and a cemetery at the west. An important folk tale says a swan deity flew down from heaven and showed the Thai Lû how to build their houses on stilts as protection from animals and flooding, and with long sloping roofs to shield the inhabitants from sun, wind and rain. Small shuttered windows known as *pong liem* allow residents to see out but restrict outsiders from seeing in. In reference to this bit of folklore, they call their traditional homes *héuan hông* (swan houses).

Their more distinctive customs include *suu khwân khuwái* (string-tying ceremony for water buffaloes) and *suu khwân sâang* (string-tying ceremony for elephants).

and decidedly Laotian experience. Boats leave the Pak Lai boat landing from 8am to 9am but they often fill up by 7.30am so it's a good idea to be at the ticket office, located at the Boat Transport Office, at 7am. There are no more slow boats north.

Speedboats from Pak Lai to Vientiane (US\$30, four hours) leave when there are six passengers.

Hongsa

ຫີງສາ
☎ 074

This district, tucked away in the northwestern corner of Sainyabuli Province, roughly 85km northwest of the provincial capital, is a major centre for Thai Lû culture. Several villages in the area boast historic Thai Lû temples and strong local traditions. Travelling through this district, and even en route to Hongsa from Sainyabuli, you may see elephants walking along the road with their mahouts, as this part of Sainyabuli is a major centre for the logging of padauk and other timber. Elephants are also used for agricultural work in the area. So important are the pachyderms to daily life here that the Thai Lû perform yearly *bqasii* ceremonies (p55) on their behalf. Sadly elephant numbers have been on a steady decline due to their hefty workloads and a decreasing knowledge in the local community about how to care for them properly. However, in recent years **ElefantAsia** (www.elefantasia.org), a French organisation, has promoted education in the province regard-

ing elephant health and care, and an Elephant Festival has been established in mid-February in Hongsa to further the tourism revenue generated by them. This is good news for the elephants because it spells improvements to their general well-being. Elephant trekking is also possible here; see Sleeping (below) for more information.

In Hongsa itself the main temple is **Wat Simungkhun** (also known as Wat Yai), where a very old, whitewashed *wihâan* contains an oddly raised stone floor that allegedly covers a large hole that 'leads to the end of the world', according to locals. Women aren't allowed to enter the *wihâan*, but from the doorway you can see the impressive collection of Lao Buddha figures on the altar inside.

In nearby **Vieng Kaew** old houses built with padauk (*Pterocarpus indicus*, a reddish-orange tropical hardwood sometimes called 'Asian rosewood') abound.

SLEEPING & EATING

Jumbo House (Xang Luang; r US\$8) This one-storey guesthouse offers five large rooms. Information on Vieng Kaew and Muang Ngoen is available here, and bicycles can be hired. Jumbo can also arrange elephant trekking with a few hours notice.

Sunflower Guest House (r US\$5.50-7.50) Just around the corner from the Jumbo House, Sunflower boasts 10 rooms in a two-storey house next to a lotus pond and spacious garden with café.

Villa Sisouphanh (☎ 211791; r US\$3) Found opposite the market, Sisouphanh is the better of a couple of older guesthouses in Hongsa, with adequate rooms.

Lotus Café (meals US\$1-3) A pleasant new spot for a drink or a meal overlooking lotus ponds, the menu covers Lao, Italian and Korean barbecue.

In the market are several restaurant stalls. At the best, **Tui** (meals US\$0.50-1.50), you can get *khào sáwy*, *khào piák*, *fôe* and cold beer.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

You can reach Hongsa via a wild *sáwnghtháew* ride over high mountain ridges and into deep valleys from Sainyabuli (US\$10, six hours, one daily). Most of this road is unsealed and crosses several low bridges made from logs, so in the rainy season the usual six hours could easily stretch to eight or 10. During heavy rains the road may wash out entirely for several days.

Alternatively, catch a slow boat along the Mekong River from Luang Prabang (US\$8, half-day) or Huay Xai (US\$17.50, one and a half days). From Tha Suang you can hop on a shared jumbo to Hongsa (US\$3.50, two to three hours).

Speedboats also connect Tha Suang to Luang Prabang (US\$15, two hours).

Muang Ngoen

ເມືອງເງິນ

This Thai Lû village in the extreme northeast corner of the province, 3km from the Thai border, is worth a visit if you're in the area already or passing through from Thailand (once

the border opens, that is). There are still a few houses on stilts with high-pitched roofs sloping low to the ground (similar to those found in Muang Sing and in China's Xishuangbanna District), although many of these were destroyed when the Thai air force bombed Laos during the 1988 Thai-Lao border war.

Farming is the main activity, and one made more profitable by the open Thai-Lao border at nearby Ban Huay Kon – a crossing thus far permitted for Thai and Lao nationals only. There have been plans to open this crossing to all nationalities for several years. If this eventuates this will become the fastest land route between Luang Prabang and Thailand.

Muang Ngoen's **Wat Ban Khon**, a traditional Thai Lû-style temple where the monks still use palm leaves for the preservation of Buddhist texts, is notable for its natural-pigment, folk-art murals, which combine animal and floral motifs with tiny mirrors to unique effect.

Another old Thai Lû wat, **Wat Salibun Nyeun**, stands on a high bluff overlooking a town, with a lovely stream winding through the valley below. Pillars inside the main *wihâan* are cut from huge padauk trunks.

Few foreign visitors choose to spend the night in Muang Ngoen, but if you feel like digging into local life, you can choose between the **Amphawan Guest House** (r US\$1-3) and **Saijaloen Guest House** (r US\$2-3).

The easiest way to reach Muang Ngoen is via a dirt road from the bank of the Mekong River opposite Pak Beng, a distance of roughly 35km. Ask in Pak Beng about transport to Muang Ngoen. Your best bet may be to hitch a ride with someone coming from here.

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