

Southern Laos



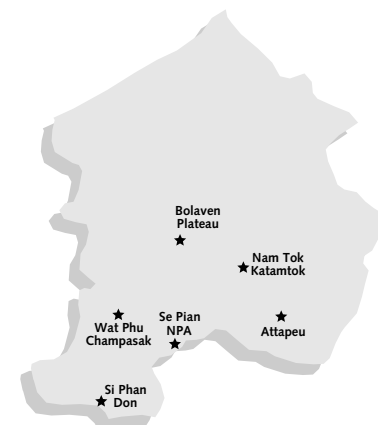
A contrasting combination of archetypal Mekong River life, the cooler climes of the Bolaven Plateau and three remote and little-visited eastern provinces make southern Laos a real mixed bag of tasty offerings. The whole area remains refreshingly raw, but as in the rest of Laos a series of community-based tourism projects have made getting inside Lao-style life easier than ever.

The obvious, almost unavoidable staging point is Pakse, the Mekong River-side capital of Champasak Province with an all-round good vibe. From here the Mekong flows south past the ancient Khmer religious complex at Wat Phu Champasak and Don Daeng, before spreading out in Si Phan Don, the ‘four thousand islands’ that straddle the Cambodian border. Among this stunningly beautiful maze of waterways are the palm-lined Don Khong, Don Det and Don Khon, where you can soak up the million-dollar sunsets from your hammock without being interrupted by endless reruns of *Friends* (for now, at least).

Going east from Pakse you climb to the cooler climes of the Bolaven Plateau, with its picturesque waterfalls and high-grade coffee. Keep going and you start getting well off the beaten track and into the little visited provinces of Salavan, Sekong and Attapeu where minority ethnic groups are still surprised to see *falang* visitors. More adventurous souls will love the Southern Swing motorbike loop or negotiating themselves a boat trip down the remote and untouched Se Kong (Kong River). So whether you’re seeking an off-beat adventure or are happy just lazing in a riverside hammock, prepare to stay longer than you planned.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Get better acquainted with your hammock in the laidback Mekong islands of **Si Phan Don** (p272)
- Wake up early for a dramatic sunrise at the ancient Khmer temple complex at **Wat Phu Champasak** (p265)
- Walk and wade your way into the jungles and stay in a remote Lavae village in the **Se Pian NPA** (p271)
- Gaze in awe at 100m-high waterfalls and sip fair-trade coffee on the cool **Bolaven Plateau** (p282)
- Ride out to the wild east of **Attapeu** (p293) and back via **Nam Tok Katamtok** (p292) on the **Southern Swing** (p263)



National Protected Areas

Southern Laos has six National Protected Areas (NPAs) covering habitats as diverse as the riverine forest along the Mekong River in Phu Xieng Thong NPA to the remote mountains of Se Xap NPA. For now Phu Xieng Thong (p261) and Se Pian NPA (p271) are the easiest to get into, with village-based treks the best way to do it. Dong Hua Sao NPA at the edge of the Bolaven Plateau and the wilderness of Dong Amphan NPA can also be accessed with more time, money and organisation.

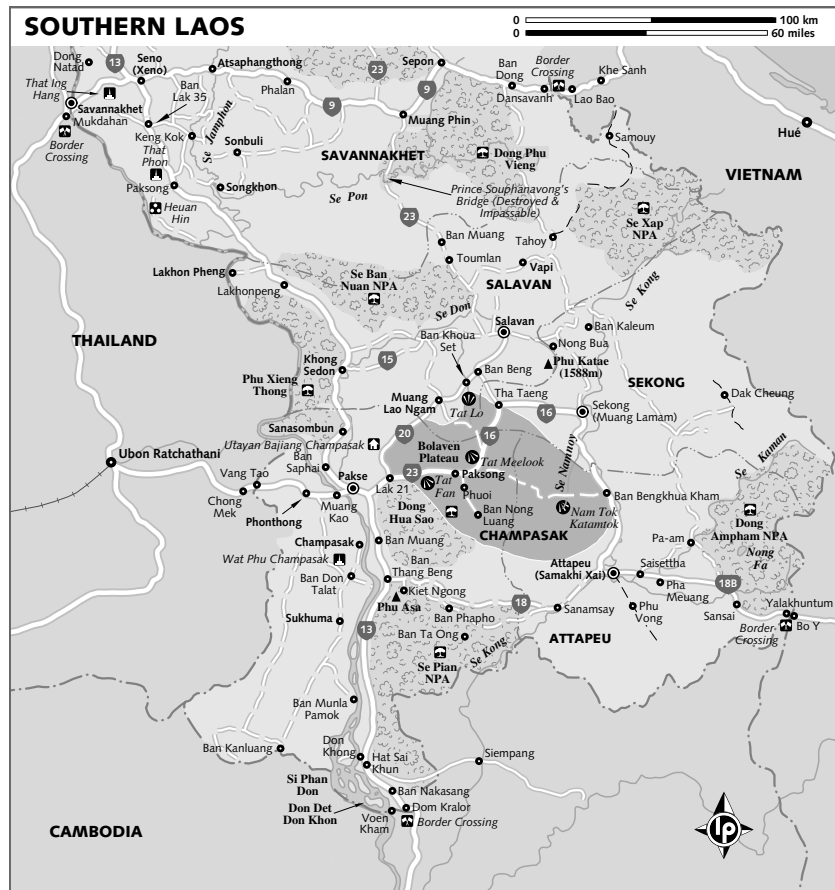
Climate

The Mekong Valley is hot most of the year but becomes hellishly so between March and May. Some relief comes from relatively

soothing river breezes, but not much. The Bolaven Plateau, on the other hand, is relatively cool all year, and from November to February it's cold after dark. The plateau also has its own mini weather system, which brings rain right into December.

Getting There & Around

There are three border crossings into Southern Laos – one each from Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Once you're in, the main roads are smooth and well-served by buses and *sawntháew* (passenger trucks). The exceptions are Rte 18 between Attapeu and Thang Beng in Champasak Province, and all the roads running north and east of Salavan. Cargo boats no longer work the Mekong.



CHAMPASAK PROVINCE

Big ticket attractions including Wat Phu Champasak, the Mekong River islands of Si Phan Don and the Bolaven Plateau make Champasak one of the most visited provinces in Laos. Champasak has a long history that began with participation in the Funan and Chenla empires between the 1st and 9th centuries AD. Between the 10th and 13th centuries it became part of the Cambodian Angkor empire. Following the decline of Angkor between the 15th and late 17th centuries, it was enfolded into the Lan Xang kingdom but then broke away to become an independent Lao kingdom at the beginning of the 18th century. The short-lived Champasak kingdom had only three monarchs: Soi Sisamut (r 1713–37), who was the nephew of Suriya Vongsa, Sainyakuman (r 1737–91) and finally Fai Na (r 1791–1811).

Today Champasak Province has a population of more than 500,000 including lowland Lao (many of them Phu Thai), Khmers and a host of small Mon-Khmer groups, most of whom live in the Bolaven Plateau region.

PAKSE

ປາກເຂມ

☎ 031 / pop 66,000

Founded by the French in 1905 as an administrative outpost, Pakse sits at the confluence of the Mekong River and the Se Don (Don River) and is the capital of Champasak Province. The town has grown quickly since the Lao-Japanese Bridge across the Mekong was opened in 2002, facilitating brisk trade with Thailand. Its position on the way to Si Phan Don in the far south, the Bolaven Plateau and remote provinces to the east, and Thailand to the west means anyone choosing to travel in the south will almost certainly spend time in Pakse.

The centre of Pakse retains the sort of Mekong River–town lethargy found in Savannakhet and Tha Khaek further north. Fewer colonial-era buildings remain, though do look for the Franco-Chinese–style **Chinese Society building** on Th 10 in the centre of town.

The vast Talat Dao Heung (New Market) near the Lao-Japanese Bridge is one of the biggest in the country, famous for its selection of fresh produce and coffee from the fertile Bolaven Plateau. Short day trips from Pakse

can be made to Ban Saphai and Don Kho (p260), weaving centres 15km north of town.

Information

EMERGENCY

Hospital (☎ 212018; Th 10 & Th 4)

Police (☎ 212145; Th 10)

INTERNET ACCESS & TELEPHONE

ADSL has arrived in Pakse and the main street, or nearby, has several options, including the following:

@d@m's Internet (Rte 13; per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 8am–10pm) Can download image files and burn CDs (US\$1.50); international calls are about US\$0.30 per minute.

Next Step Internet (Th 24; per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 8am–11pm) Burns CDs and DVDs for US\$1.50 each.

SD Internet (Rte 13; per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 7am–8pm) Fast connections.

MONEY

BCEL (☎ 212770; Th 11; ☎ 8.30am–3.30pm Mon–Fri, 8.30–10am Sat) South of Wat Luang, has best rates for cash and travellers cheques and makes cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212168; Rte 13; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, 8am–3pm Sat & Sun) Changes cash and travellers cheques in the smaller exchange office; cash advances (Monday to Friday only) in the main building.

Lao Viet Bank (☎ 251470; Rte 13; ☎ 9.30am–4pm Mon–Fri)

POST

Main post office (cnr Th 8 & Th 1) South of the town centre.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Provincial Tourism Office (☎ 212021; Th 11; ☎ 8am–noon & 1.30–4pm Mon–Fri) On the Se Don (Don River) near the Lao Airlines office, the well-organised English-speaking staff here can book you onto community-based treks in Se Pian NPA and Phu Xieng Thong NPA, and into homestays on Don Kho and Don Daeng; there's no commission. They also should be armed with all the latest schedules for buses heading anywhere from Pakse.

TRAVEL AGENCIES & TOUR OPERATORS

Most hotels can arrange day trips to the Bolaven Plateau, Wat Phu Champasak and Si Phan Don. For longer and more adventurous trips, try these:

Green Discovery (☎ 252908; www.greendiscoverylaos.com; Rte 13) Operates rafting, kayaking (both US\$27 per person for four or more), mountain biking and trekking trips. Well respected.

Lane Xang Travel (Xplore Asia; www.xplore-asia.com; Rte 13) Similar trips to Green Discovery, with more to Si Phan Don.

Vat Phou (www.asian-oasis.com; Th 11) Operates luxury cruises between Pakse and Don Khong.

Sights & Activities

Much more about being than seeing, Pakse's 'sights' are limited.

CHAMPASAK HISTORICAL HERITAGE MUSEUM

ພິພິດທະພັນນິລດົກປະຫວັດສາດຈຳປາສັກ

Near the Hotel Residence du Champa, the **Champasak Historical Heritage Museum** (Rte 13; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-4pm) has a few artefacts and a lot of boring documents chronicling the history of the province. Once you get past the Lao and Communist hammer-and-sickle flags at the entrance you're in the best part of the museum – three very old Dong Son bronze drums and striking 7th-century sandstone lintels found at Uo Moung (Tomo Temple). The simple textile and jewellery collection from the Nyaeun, Suay and Laven groups is also interesting for its large iron ankle bracelets and ivory ear plugs since these are rarely worn nowadays.

Also on the ground floor are musical instruments, stelae in the Tham script dating from the 15th to 18th centuries, a water jar from the 11th or 12th century, a small lingam (Shiva phallus), plus a model of Wat Phu Champasak.

Once you head upstairs you'll be beginning your last five minutes in the museum. Apart a small collection of Buddha images and forlorn-looking American weaponry, it's all headshots of Party members.

WATS

There are about 20 wats in the city, of which Wat Luang and Wat Tham Fai (both founded in 1935) are the largest. A monastic school at **Wat Luang** features ornate concrete pillars, carved wooden doors and murals; the artist's whimsy departs from canonical art without losing the traditional effect. Behind the *sim* is a monks' school in an original wooden building. A *thaat* on the grounds contains the ashes of Khamtay Loun Sasothith, a former prime minister in the Royal Lao Government.

Wat Tham Fai, near the Champasak Palace Hotel, is undistinguished except for its spacious grounds, making it a prime site for tem-

ple festivals. It's also known as Wat Pha Baht because there is a small Buddha footprint shrine. The stupas and Pepsi billboard near Rte 13 make good photos in the afternoon.

GYM

The **Champasak Palace Hotel** (☎ 212777; www.champasak-palace-hotel.com; Rte 13; ☎ 2-10pm) gym is free for guests and a bargain US\$0.70 for visitors to use the weight room. There's also massage, sauna, and Jacuzzi.

MASSAGE & SAUNA

The professional and popular massage and sauna **Clinic Keo Ou Done** (Traditional Medicine Hospice; ☎ 251895, 020-5431115; ☎ 4-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat-Sun) has an air-con massage room and herbal sauna segregated by gender. A massage (highly recommended!), usually with medicated balms, costs US\$2.50 per hour. Unlimited use of the herbal sauna costs US\$0.80. To get there, take a jumbo east on Rte 13. About 100m before the Km 3 marker, turn right and follow the 'Massage Sauna' signs another 800m.

Sleeping BUDGET

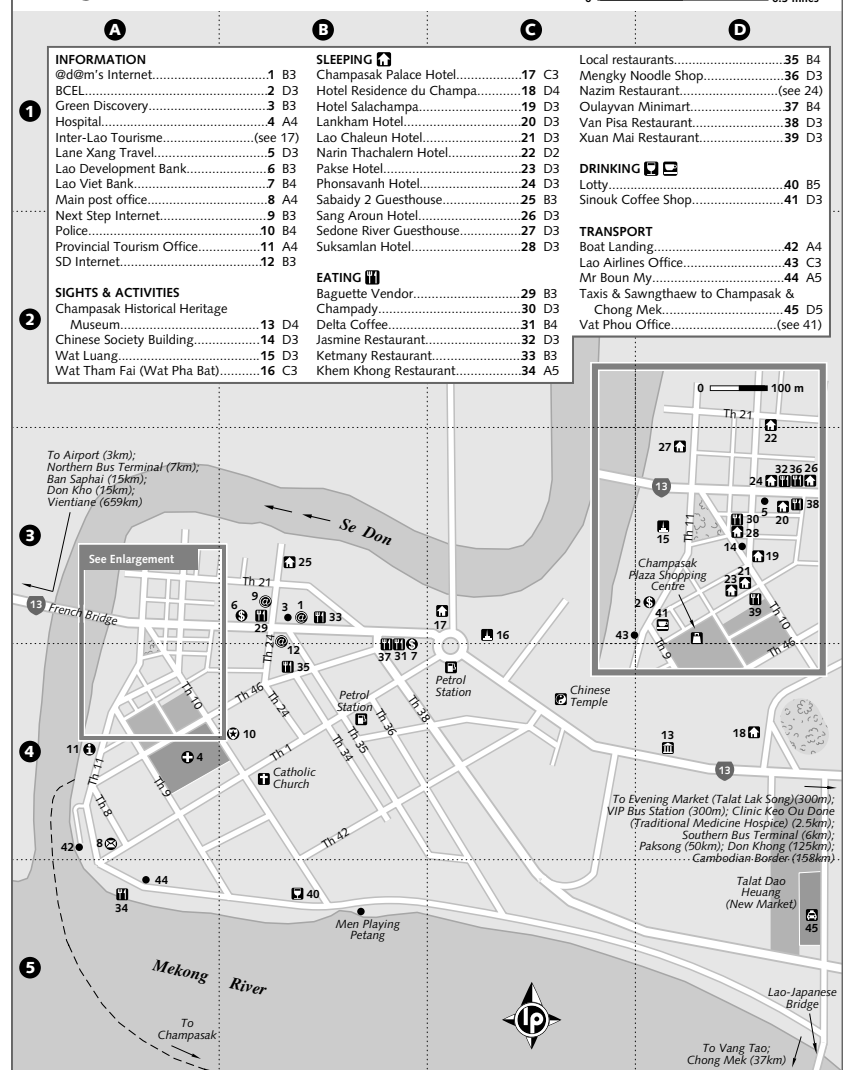
Sabaigy 2 Guesthouse (☎ /fax 212992; www.sabaigy2laos.com; Th 24; dm US\$1.90, r US\$3.50-5.50; ☎) If you want cheap-but-clean lodgings, good information and to be surrounded by other backpackers, this is the place for you. It's often so busy you'll need to book ahead to get a bed. Service, however, can be very relaxed and you might need to jump around waving your arms to get someone's attention. They also hire motorbikes (p260).

Phonsavanh Hotel (☎ 252912; cnr Th 12 & Rte 13; r US\$3-4) Above Nazim Restaurant, which also runs the hotel, Phonsavanh has very basic fan rooms with or without cold-water bathroom.

Sedone River Guesthouse (☎ 212158; Th 11; tw US\$4-6; ☎) In a couple of old buildings right on the Se Don, this relaxed place has small twin rooms with cold-water bathrooms plus a couple of larger rooms with hot water and air-con. It's not crystal clean, but OK for the money. The shaded riverside sala (open-sided shelter) is ideal for sundowners.

Narine Thachalern Hotel (☎ 212927; Th 21; s/d US\$4/8; ☎) Rooms with fridge and TV are clean and quiet. Not all are the same, though, so ask the English-speaking man-

PAKSE



ager to show you a couple. All up, not a bad option in the old part of town.

Lankham Hotel (☎ 213314; lanekhamhotel@yahoo.com; Rte 13; r US\$5-10; ☎) The Lankham is right in the centre of town and front-facing rooms (some of the few with windows that don't look onto a corridor) can be noisy. Rooms are small and smaller.

Lao Chaleun Hotel (☎ 251333; fax 251138; Th 10; s/d/tw US\$5.40/10.80/12; ☎) Both the rooms and service in this three-storey place are decent if uninspiring. Singles have fan and cold-water bathrooms. They also rent vehicles (p260).

Suksamlan Hotel (☎ 020-563 2077; Th 14; r US\$5.50-6.50; ☎) The central Suksamlan has 24 ageing but large and clean rooms with hot-water

bathrooms. The building itself has a certain fading charm and manager Mr Bouphan is helpful.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Pakse Hotel (☎ 212131; www.paksehotel.com; Th 5; r US\$12-32; 🍷) This well-run six-storey place in the centre of town is excellent value. Rooms all come with fridge and satellite TV; the cheapest have no windows, but the US\$19 rooms have Mekong views. Service is the best in southern Laos and the cafeteria downstairs and rooftop restaurant-cum-bar are reasonably good.

Hotel Salachampa (☎ 212273; fax 212646; Th 14; r US\$13-15; 🍷) Just around the corner from the Pakse Hotel, this French-era villa has some wonderful big rooms with wooden floors (tiled downstairs), high ceilings and tasteful furnishings. Rooms in the villa (US\$15) are much better value, as those in the newer building (US\$13) are small and altogether less appealing.

Sang Aroun Hotel (☎ 252111; Rte 13; r US\$17-20; 🍷) This modern Thai-style hotel is compact but clean and well-equipped rooms if not much soul. For affordable comfort it's a good choice.

Champasak Palace Hotel (☎ 212777; www.champasak-palace-hotel.com; Rte 13; r incl breakfast US\$20-150; 🍷 📺 📺) You can't miss the vast, wedding-cake style Champasak Palace, on Rte 13 about 1km east of the town centre. It was originally built as a palace for Chao Boun Oum na Champasak, the last prince of Champasak and the prime minister of the Kingdom of Laos between 1960 and 1962. Boun Oum started building the palace in 1968, fled to Paris in 1974 and died soon after. It was renovated, and in some places completed, by a Thai group during the 1990s, with government help; look at the architraves above the fourth floor for the tell-tale hammer and sickle stucco work. New management has taken it a step further, and the 115 comfortable rooms now offer excellent value, particularly the superior (US\$40) and VIP suites (US\$50), the latter of which have panoramic views. Rooms in a second building are not as good. All rooms superior and above have free broadband internet connections. The only downside is that service remains a bit raw and language can be a problem.

Hotel Residence du Champa (☎ 212120; champare@laotel.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$25/30; 🍷)

This place in a small road off Rte 13 is a good option. In four modern buildings of concrete, marble and teak, all 45 rooms have satellite TV, minibar and IDD phone, and some have bathtubs. French and English are spoken and there's a decent restaurant.

Eating

Eating with the locals, especially at breakfast and lunch, is a fun Lao experience. The restaurant under the **Lankham Hotel** and, just across Rte 13, the **Mengky Noodle Shop** are safe and popular places for noodles and soup; Mengky is rightly famous for its duck *fôe* breakfasts. Even better is the spread of **local restaurants** on Th 46, each one serving something slightly different; just wander along and take your pick. The restaurants are open all day.

LAO, THAI AND VIETNAMESE

Xuan Mai Restaurant (☎ 213245; Th 4; meals US\$1-2.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the corner opposite the Pakse Hotel, Xuan Mai serves top-notch *fôe* (US\$0.80; the chicken *fôe* is best), *khào pùn* (white flour noodles with sweet-spicy sauce), fruit shakes and even garlic bread. Open until midnight, it's the best place for a late feed.

Ketmany Restaurant (☎ 212615; Rte 13; meals US\$1.50-4; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Ketmany serves decent European food and very good Vietnamese dishes, though many are not on the English menu so you'll need to ask by name. It also has good ice cream and packed-with-processed-meat Western breakfasts (US\$2).

Champady (☎ 020-513 0513; meals US\$1.50-4.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) In a French-era building, atmospheric Champady serves Thai cuisine and coffee in an attractive streetside location.

Khem Khong Restaurant (☎ 213240; Th 11; meals US\$2-5; 🍷 lunch & dinner) On the Mekong just south of town, this is one of several floating restaurants and has a well-earned reputation for excellent seafood. It's best in a group so you can share several dishes, especially the *ping pqa* (grilled fish).

WESTERN & INDIAN

Delta Coffee (☎ 030-534 5895; Rte 13; meals US\$1.50-5; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Delta serves a vast array of food, the best being the Italian and Thai dishes. The vegetarian lasagne

and pizzas are particularly recommended, but not the gnocchi. Breakfasts are tasty and great value. Owners Alan and Siriporn serve probably the best coffee in town from their plantation near Paksong, and raise money to build schools for the children of plantation workers.

Van Pisa Restaurant (☎ 212982; Rte 13; pizzas US\$3.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An Italian-run Italian restaurant where the pizzas are quite good and pastas are as tasty as the ingredients allow. They also serve delicious shakes and ice cream.

Travellers flock to two Indian restaurants in the centre of town. **Jasmine Restaurant** (☎ 251002; Rte 13; meals US\$2-4; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) is the original but now faces competition from a former partner running **Nazim Restaurant** (☎ 252912; Rte 13; meals US\$1.50-3.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner). Both are cheap and the competition has drastically improved service. The food, including loads of vegetarian dishes, is invariably tasty if a little over-enthusiastic on the masala.

Just west of @d@m's Internet a **baguette vendor** (Rte 13) sells decent *khào jji* in the morning and afternoon. Self-caterers should head to the market and **Oulayvan Minimart** (Rte 13; 🍷 7am-10pm).

Drinking & Entertainment

Sinouk Coffee Shop (☎ 212552; nr Th 9 & Th 11; coffee US\$0.60; 🍷 7am-8pm) In a renovated French shophouse this café is best-known for its coffee, sold both in the cup and by the bag (from US\$2 for 250g). They also sell Beerlao and have a small menu of Western dishes.

The **Champasak Palace Hotel** (opposite) should have its top-floor bar and restaurant open by the time you arrive and it should be the classiest drinking spot in town. The rooftop bar at the **Pakse Hotel** (opposite) is also good for a sunset Beerlao or two.

For some Lao-style partying, check out **Lotty** (Th 11; 🍷 6-11pm), the current favourite nightclub among young Lao looking to drink and dance; downstairs is where the action is.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lao Airlines flies between Pakse and Vientiane daily (US\$95 one way, 70 minutes). There are also two flights per week to Luang

Prabang (US\$135, one hour 40 minutes), though these might not run all year.

International flights go to Phnom Penh (US\$95, one way, 70 minutes) twice per week and three times per week to Siem Reap (US\$85, 45 minutes), though these flights can be cancelled if there's no demand, and in the low season this is often the case. To be sure, check at the Pakse **Lao Airlines office** (☎ 212252; Th 11; 🍷 8-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) the day before. Bangkok Airways and its subsidiary Siem Reap Airways should be flying a couple of services per week between Pakse and Bangkok (about US\$100) and Pakse and Siem Reap by the time you read this.

The airport is 3km northwest of town and has a BCEL exchange office. A jumbo should cost about US\$1.

BOAT

Like so many others (p325), the public boat from Pakse to Champasak and Don Khong has more-or-less stopped, unable to compete with soaring fuel prices and *săwngthăew* that do the trip in half the time for less money. At the time of writing occasional boats still ran as far as Champasak, but it was impossible to know whether it would go until it actually pulled out from the riverbank near the confluence of the Se Don and the Mekong.

If you don't have endless time to wait for one of these occasional boats and you have the money it's possible to rent a boat, though they don't really have the charm of boats packed with locals, farm animals, snakes, bags of rice and monks sitting on the roof. With some language skills you could charter a boat at the aforementioned confluence of the rivers. Alternatively, ask **Mr Boun My** (☎ 020-5631008; Th 11), who can be found nearby at the first barbecue pork stall opposite the Mekong as the road bends left. He rents boats to Champasak (US\$50, one hour), to Um Tomo (US\$60, 90 minutes) and Don Khong (US\$140, four to five hours). These prices are for six people or less and rise with the number of passengers – for example, 25 people (the maximum) to Champasak costs US\$80 for the boat.

BUS & SĂWNGTHĂEW

Pakse has several bus and *săwngthăew* terminals.

VIP Bus Station

The **VIP Bus Station** (☎ 212228; off Rte 13), also known as the Evening Market Bus Station or Km 2 Bus Station, is where most VIP buses to Vientiane (US\$13, eight to 10 hours, 677km) originate, though they also usually stop in town, either at the Indian restaurants or near the bus offices beside the Se Don. It's possible to take these buses to Seno (for Savannakhet) and Tha Khaek, but the arrival times are pretty unfriendly and you have to pay the full fare. Tickets for the various VIP buses are available in guesthouses, restaurants and internet cafes all over town; just ask where you need to be when the bus is leaving.

The other service leaving here is the handy Thai-Lao International Bus; see opposite for details.

Dao Heung Market (Morning Market)

Buses and *sāwngthāew* leave the *sāwngthāew* farm at the edge of the **Dao Heung Market** for Champasak (US\$1.30, one to two hours) and for Ban Saphai (US\$0.50, about 40 minutes) regularly between about 6.30am and 3pm.

Northern Bus Terminal

At the **northern terminal** (☎ 251508), usually called *khíw lot lák jét* (Km 7 bus terminal), 7km north of town on Rte 13, you'll find a steady procession of agonisingly slow normal buses (without air-con) heading north. Every 50 minutes or so between 6.30am and 4.30pm a slow bus starts the long haul to Savannakhet (US\$3, four to five hours, 277km), Tha Khaek (US\$5.50, eight to nine hours), and, for those of you with plenty of time, no money and a wide masochistic streak, Vientiane (US\$8.50, 16 to 18 hours). The durations of these journeys are very flexible and depend on how long the bus stops in Savannakhet – sometimes as long as two hours.

For buses from Vientiane see p113.

Southern Bus Terminal

For transport anywhere south or east, head to the **southern terminal** (*khíw lot lák pæet* or 'Km 8 bus terminal'), south of town on Rte 13. The transport might be a bus, but it could just as easily be a *sāwngthāew*. For Si Phan Don, there are several departures for Muang Khong (US\$3.50 including ferry, three hours, 120km) between 10am and 3pm; while transport to Ban Nakasang for Don Det and Don Khon (US\$3, three to four hours) leaves between

7.30am and 3pm. Transport going to Ban Nakasang stops at Hat Xai Khun or nearby on Rte 13, from where an 800m walk and a boat will have you at Don Khong. Some of these buses/*sāwngthāew* go all the way to Voen Kham (US\$4, 3½ to 4½ hours) on the Cambodian border. One *sāwngthāew* runs to Kiet Ngong and Ban Phapho (US\$1.50, two to three hours) leaving at 1pm.

Transport to the Bolaven Plateau leaves for Paksong (US\$1.50, 90 minutes) five times between 9am and 1pm, stopping at Tat Fan if you ask. Transport to Salavan (US\$2, three to four hours, 115km) leaves at 7.30am, 9.10am, 10.40am, 12.15pm and 2pm, most going via smooth Rte 20 and Tat Lo, if you ask. Buses to Sekong (US\$2.50, 3½ to 4½ hours, 135km) leave at 7.30am, 9.30am and 2pm; and to Attapeu (US\$3.50, 4½ to six hours, 212km) at 6.30am, 8am and 10.30am, and sometimes at 1pm. Transport for Attapeu also stops at Paksong, Tha Taeng and Sekong.

Getting Around

Using any of Pakse's local transport on a shared basis costs between US\$0.25 and US\$0.40; you might need to bargain a bit. A ride to either bus terminal costs about US\$0.50. For charter, the standard fares to the bus stations are US\$1.50 (*sāam-lāaw*) or US\$2 (jumbo or tuk-tuk).

Several shops and guesthouses rent bicycles, usually for US\$1 per day. Motorbikes are also readily available, with the Sabaidy 2 Guesthouse (p256) having the cheapest bikes (US\$8 per day, or US\$7 for more than one day). The Lankham Hotel (p258) has better bikes, but their US\$8 'a day' only buys you 12 hours. If you fancy tackling the Ho Chi Minh Trail, their Honda Baja 250cc trail bikes for US\$20 per full day might interest. Discounts are possible for longer hire. The Lao Chaleun Hotel (p256) also hires out motos (US\$10 per day), and cars and vans with driver (price depends on destination, but to Champasak return is about US\$40).

AROUND PAKSE

You don't have to go far from Pakse for a fun day out.

Don Kho & Ban Saphai

ບ້ານສະພາຍ/ດອນໂຄ

About 15km north of Pakse, the Mekong island of Don Kho and the nearby village of Ban

CROSSING THE THAI BORDER AT VANG TAO & CHONG MEK

The crossing at Vang Tao (Laos) and Chong Mek (Thailand) is the busiest in southern Laos and is open from 5am to 6pm daily. From Pakse, *sāwngthāew* (US\$0.80, 75 minutes, 44km) and some of the most battered taxis (US\$2 per person or US\$10 for whole vehicle, 45 minutes) you're ever likely to see run between Talat Dao Heuang (New Market) and Vang Tao. When your transport stops, walk about 300m up to the green-roofed building, where you'll be stamped out. Immigration is also here, plus an exchange office offering criminally poor rates.

Walk through the throngs of traders and small-time smugglers loitering around the border, then another 100m or so to Thai immigration, who by the time you arrive should be in their startling new building that looks vaguely like a plate full of purple nachos minus the guacamole. They'll issue your visa in short order. Taxi drivers usually wait outside immigration and want about B700 to B900 for a whole air-con van to Ubon Ratchatani (one hour, 82km). The cheaper option is to walk to the end of the stall-lined street and find a *sāwngthāew* (35B, one hour, 42km) to Phibun Mangsahan. It will drop you at a point where another *sāwngthāew* will soon pick you up for the trip to Ubon (B35, one hour, 40km). For details on buses and trains between Ubon and Bangkok, see p322.

Much easier is the Thai-Lao International Bus (200B or equivalent, 2½ to 3 hours, 126km) direct between Pakse and Ubon. Buses leave Pakse at 7am, 8.30am, 2.30pm and 3.30pm, and run from Ubon's main bus station at 7.30am, 9.30am, 2.30pm and 3.30pm; check these times with the Provincial Tourism Office (p255).

Saphai are famous as silk weaving centres. Women can be seen working on large looms underneath their homes producing distinctive silk and cotton *phào sālóng*, long sarongs for men, and are happy to let you watch.

Like Don Daeng further south, there are no cars on Don Kho and despite the recent arrival of electricity it's easy to feel like you're stepping back to a more simple time. The 300 or so residents live in villages at either side of the 800m-wide island and farm rice in the centre. Believe it or not, Don Kho was briefly the capital of southern Laos following the French arrival in the 1890s, and it later served as a mooring point for boats steaming between Don Det and Savannakhet. These days, however, the only real sight is **Wat Don Kho**, which has some French-era buildings and an impressive drum tower. In the southeast corner of the grounds is a soaring tree that locals say is 500 years old, though 200 seems more realistic. These trees periodically have fires burned inside the trunks to extract a resin used to seal boats.

The villages of Don Kho are some of the best places to experience a homestay (see p48) in southern Laos. Just turn up on the island and say 'homestay' and the villagers will sort you out. A homestay will cost US\$2 per bed, with a maximum two people per house. You'll eat with your host family (US\$2 per meal or US\$1.50 each for three people or more); in our experience the food was delicious.

If homestay doesn't sound like your thing there's a **community guesthouse** at the edge of the **sacred forest** on the far side of the island. Bed and meal rates are the same as a homestay, and villagers will help you make a small offering to the forest spirit to smooth your stay. Just say 'guesthouse' when you turn up and someone will lead you there (it's about a 700m walk). Alternatively, the guys in the new **tourist office** at the boat pier in Ban Saphai speak better English and can phone ahead for you.

A couple of villagers speak enough English to arrange the homestays, guided tours of the island (US\$3 per guide, one to four people), Lao-style fishing trips (US\$2.50) and even lessons in silk weaving (US\$5 per day, plus materials) – we heard of one woman who spent four days 'homestay' and learning to weave.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sāwngthāew to Ban Saphai (US\$0.60, 45 minutes) leave fairly regularly from Pakse's Dao Heung Market (Morning Market), or hire a tuk-tuk or *sāam-lāaw* for about US\$5 one way. From Ban Saphai to Don Kho boats cost US\$1 for one to five people, or US\$0.20 per person for more.

Phu Xieng Thong NPA

ປ່າສະຫງວນແຫ່ງຊາດພູຊຶ່ງທອງ

Although the majority of the 1200 sq km **Phu Xieng Thong NPA** (www.ecotourismlaos.com) lies in

Salavan Province, its most accessible areas are about 50km upriver from Pakse. The area features scrub, mixed monsoon deciduous forest and exposed sandstone ridges and cave-like outcroppings, some of which contain pre-historic paintings. On the Thai side of the Mekong is Pha Taem National Park.

The Phu Xieng Thong NPA is home to a range of wildlife, including important concentrations of banteng, green peafowl and clouded leopard. Elephant, Douc langur, gibbon, Asiatic black bear and tiger might also pass through, but visitors will be very lucky to see any of these. If the season is right you're much more likely to see some striking wild orchids.

The best way into Phu Xieng Thong NPA is on a two- or three-day community-based trek beginning in the Mekong village of **Ban Singsamphan**. The trip involves river transport, a homestay in Ban Singsamphan and a trek over historically important **Phu Khong** (Khong Mountain). It's best to start the four to five-hour trek early, as it can get pretty warm. Parts of the trek cross exposed rock outcroppings that are home to mysterious archaeological ruins and afford amazing views. More enjoyable is the two-hour walk through beautiful forest, with the possibility of a lunch-stop with a hermit nun. The nun lives in a cave and has forsaken speaking and many foods for several years, in the name of world peace. Bizarre, yes, but her dedication is quite inspirational. The two-day trip finishes after the trek but we recommend the three-day version, which heads downriver to Don Kho (p260) for a homestay there.

Limited transport means it is possible but difficult to reach Ban Singsamphan independently – if you're interested get the low-down from the Provincial Tourism Office in Pakse (p255).

CHAMPASAK

ຈັບປາສັກ
☎ 031

It's hard to imagine Champasak as a seat of royalty, but until only 30 years ago it was just that. These days the town is serenely quiet, the fountain circle in the middle of the main street alluding to a grandeur long gone. The remaining French colonial-era buildings, including one that once belonged to Chao Boun Oum na Champasak and another to his father Chao Ratsadanai, share space with traditional

Lao wooden houses. The few vehicles that venture down the narrow main street share it with buffaloes and cows which seem relaxed even by Lao standards – it's easy to spend a couple of days here.

The Angkor-period ruins of Wat Phu Champasak (p265) lie 8km southwest of town and are the main attraction; Champasak has the only accommodation in the immediate vicinity of Wat Phu. The town also acts as a jumping off point for Don Daeng (see p268).

Just about everything in Champasak is spread along the one riverside street, either side of the fountain circle.

Information

The **Lao Development Bank** (☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) changes cash and travellers cheques – US\$2 per cheque if you want dollars, no charge at all for kip.

The new **Champasak District Visitor Information Centre** (☎ 020-220 6215; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) should be your first point of call in Champasak. It has well-presented displays with information about the town, Wat Phu, Um Tomo and Don Daeng; and will arrange boats to Don Daeng and a bed in the guesthouse there. Local guides, some of whom speak English, lead day walks around Wat Phu and the ancient city, and to Um Tomo. Guides charge US\$5/10 for a half/full day, irrespective of numbers.

Internet Nam Oly (per hr US\$1.80; ☎ 9am-7pm), about 150m south of the Vong Pased Guest House, is the only place to get online.

Sights

Champasak has a couple of mildly interesting temples. On a dirt road parallel to the main north-south street, is the late 19th-century **Wat Nyuthitham**, more commonly known as Wat Thong. An old *sim* features an arched and colonnaded veranda, and has a washed pastel stucco relief on the front. This was the wat used by Champasak's royal family, and the *thâat kâdyuk* here contain the ashes of King Nyuthitham (died 1885), Chao Ratsadanai (died 1946) and Chao Boun Oum (died 1975), among other royalty.

About 8km south of town on the Mekong stands the oldest active temple in Champasak, **Wat Phuthawanaram**, more popularly known as Wat Muang Kang. Like the *sim* at Wat Thong, the intriguing *hâw tqi* (Tripitaka library) at Wat Muang Kang combines elements of French-colonial and

THE SOUTHERN SWING

The Southern Swing is a motorbike or bicycle trip starting in Pakse and taking in the Bolaven Plateau and other southern provinces, see Map p254. By motorbike it can take anywhere from three days to as long as you like, depending on how fast you go and how often you stop. The route we've laid out here takes six days but this is only a guide – everything about it is as flexible as you like. On a bicycle doing it in reverse is a good idea. Distances are fairly accurate, if not exact (we didn't trust our bike's odometer). Most roads are sealed, and those that are not are in relatively good condition, meaning 110cc bikes are fine. Read *Motorcycle Diaries* (p328) before you go.

Day 1 – Pakse to Tat Lo

Head south out of Pakse and up toward the plateau, keeping straight at the bus station. After about 20km turn left (north) at the junction (labelled Lak 21) of routes 16 and 20 and go another 17km or so to **Utayan Bajieng Champasak** (Phasoume Resort, p285), which is good for lunch. Continue on Rte 20 towards **Tat Lo** (p286) and look for the **Katu village** with a textile market (on the right).

Day 2 – Tat Lo to Sekong

It's easy to spend two nights in Tat Lo, but if not then head about 28km up the road for a look around **Salavan** (p288). If that doesn't appeal, go just 4km to Ban Beng and turn right on the road to Tha Taeng. This 30km, bumpy road climbs up onto the **Bolaven Plateau** through **Katu** and **Alak villages**. Look carefully and you'll see coffins stacked beneath buildings, and perhaps traditional graves in small clearings in the forest. The dead are always buried in the forest, and usually with a significant possession; in one case we saw a child's bicycle atop a grave, in another a farmer's hoe. There are a couple of guesthouses in Tha Taeng or take 46km of sealed road to **Sekong** (p290).

Day 3 – Sekong to Attapeu

The smooth 77km road from Sekong to **Attapeu** (p293) goes past a couple of smaller waterfalls, though there are plenty of those later on. Instead, punch on through and spend the afternoon in or around pleasant Attapeu. If you're in a hurry, you could skip Attapeu and head straight up the mountain road to **Paksong** (see Day 5).

Day 4 – Around Attapeu

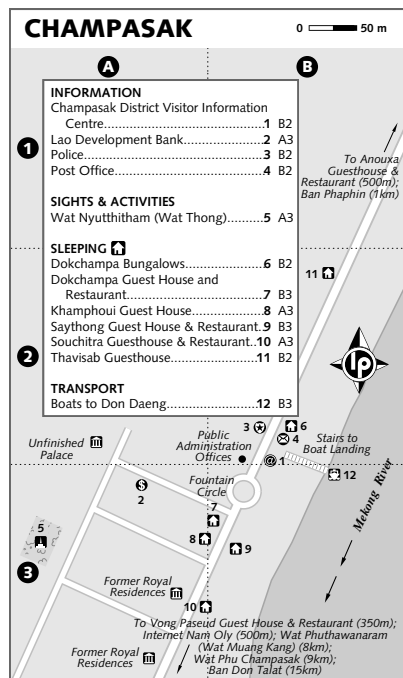
You could spend days exploring this province; check out the options on p296.

Day 5 – Attapeu to Paksong

We absolutely loved this ride, but would have loved it even more if we'd left Attapeu earlier. Do that (before 10am), and head 47km north on Rte 16 to Ban Bengkhua Kham. Top up your tank and check your odometer here before heading up the beautiful, shaded road through pristine jungle. You won't see many people, but the few Laven we saw included cheroot-sucking women in *sin*, and a couple of guys with unfeasibly long rifles slung over their shoulders with dead birds hanging from the end. After about 16km look for a waterfall in the distance to the north, and at 18km for the awesome but unsigned **Nam Tok Katamtok** (p292). Continue uphill and at about 27km you're on the **Bolaven Plateau**. Several villages dot this road towards Paksong, the last 15km of which is sealed but badly potholed. There is cheap accommodation in Paksong (p284) or smarter lodgings at Tat Fan (p284). The distance between Ban Bengkhua Kham and Paksong is 71km.

Day 6 – Paksong & around

Check out some of the **waterfalls** (p285), take a trek from **Tat Fan** and drink some decent coffee (p284). And that's it. Hang around here another day or head back to Pakse.



Lao Buddhist architecture. The three-tiered roofs of the *sim* and *hăw tqi* have coloured mosaics at the corners, and a small box with coloured crystal windows at the centre of the top roof ridge – reminiscent of Burmese architecture.

Ostensibly these crystal-sided boxes hold Buddha images, but local legend ascribes a more magical purpose to the one atop the *hăw tqi*. Supposedly at a certain moment in the annual lunar calendar (most say it's during the Wat Phu Festival), in the middle of the night, a mystic light beam comes from across the river, bounces through the *kăew* (crystal) and alights atop Sri Lingaparvata, the holy mountain above Wat Phu Champasak.

You can reach Wat Muang Kang by boat from Champasak, or come by bike on the narrow dirt road along the riverbank. You could combine a boat trip to Wat Muang Kang with a visit to Uo Moung (p270).

Sleeping & Eating

Finding a room in Champasak is easy enough except during the Wat Phu Champasak Festival

(Magha Puja; usually in February, see p268), when you can sleep on the ground at Wat Phu Champasak. If you do this, ask at one of the food tents for a safe spot and take particular care of your valuables.

The restaurants in the following guesthouses are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Saythong Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 030-534 6603; r US\$2) English-speaking Mr Sing's restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2) is in one of the best locations in town, and while his rooms with cold-water bathrooms are pretty basic, they're good value.

Khamphoui Guest House (☎ 252700; r US\$2-3) Just south of the circle, the simple rooms with hot-water bathrooms (in a concrete building) and overhead fans (US\$3) are recommended, and the two particularly good bungalows (US\$2) with cold-water bathrooms aren't bad either. Bike rental is also available. Good choice.

Vong Paseud Guest House (☎ 920038, 020-271 2402; r US\$3-7) About 600m south of the fountain circle, the Vong Paseud is popular with backpackers because of the English- and French-speaking owners, social riverside restaurant and free tuk-tuk from the ferry. The original rooms feature bathrooms with dubious plumbing and paper-thin walls. Newer air-con rooms are more solid. The restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2) serves up better-than-average travellers' fare.

Souchitra Guesthouse (☎ 920059; r US\$3-15; 🏠) These clean and relatively stylish double and twin rooms (some with fridge) are good value if you opt for a fan (US\$5); the same room with air-con is overpriced at US\$15. Simple rooms with cold-water bathrooms are US\$3. The spacious common veranda, riverside hammocks and restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2.50) are all good places to hang out. Motorbikes can be hired for US\$5/10 for a half/full day.

Anouxa Guesthouse (☎ 213272; d US\$4-10, f US\$15; 🏠) This welcoming place has several clean rooms with balconies overlooking the river. They are the best in town, though the location 1km north of the fountain circle is not. Fan rooms are US\$6 and bamboo bungalows with cold-water bathrooms US\$4. The attached riverside restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2) serves a mean fish soup (US\$1.20).

Other options include the **Thavisab Guesthouse** (☎ 020-573 4517; r US\$5-10; 🏠) where rates might be negotiable but there's no atmos-

phere to speak of; and the ultra-basic **Dokchampa Guest House and Restaurant** (r US\$1.50-3). The Dokchampa has newer bungalows north of the circle but they're still not fantastic.

Getting There & Away

Buses and *săwngthăew* from Pakse leave between 6.30am and about 3pm; see p260.

Ferries (US\$0.20 per person, US\$0.50 for motorbikes) from Ban Muang on the eastern side of the Mekong to Ban Phaphin (1.8km north of Champasak) on the western side run regularly during daylight hours, and 24 hours during the Wat Phu Champasak Festival. Travel from Ban Phaphin to Champasak by any vehicle is US\$0.20 per person; US\$1 charter.

You can also charter a ferry – actually two canoes lashed together with a few planks to create a rustic catamaran – from Ban Muang straight across to the Champasak boat landing for US\$0.20 per person or US\$1.50 for the whole thing. Jump on anything going between Ban Lak 30 and the ferry landing.

Leaving Champasak, *săwngthăew* and buses depart for Pakse (US\$1.30) until about 3.30pm, with early morning the busiest. Going south, get to Ban Lak 30 and hail anything going past.

Getting Around

Bicycles (US\$1 to US\$2 per day) and motorbikes (US\$5/10 per half/full day) can be hired from several guesthouses.

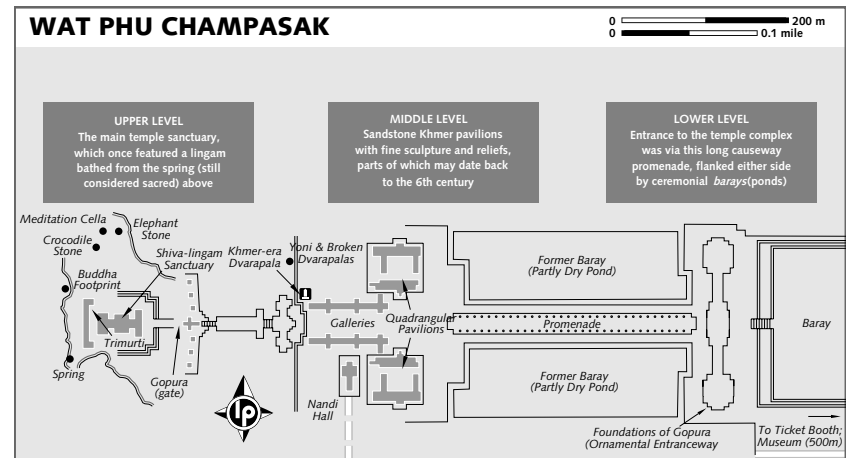
WAT PHU CHAMPASAK

វັດພູຈຳປາສັກ

The ancient Khmer religious complex of **Wat Phu** (admission US\$3, children 8 & under free; 🕒 8am-4.30pm) is one of the highlights of any trip to Laos. Stretching 1400m up to the lower slopes of the Phu Pasak range (also known more colloquially as Phu Khuai or Mt Penis), Wat Phu is small compared with the monumental Angkor-era sites near Siem Reap in Cambodia. But the tumbledown pavilions, ornate Shiva-lingam sanctuary, enigmatic crocodile stone and tall trees that shroud much of the site in soothing shade give Wat Phu an almost mystical atmosphere. These, and a site layout that is unique in Khmer architecture, led to Unesco declaring the Wat Phu complex a World Heritage Site in 2001.

Sanskrit inscriptions and Chinese sources confirm the site has been worshipped since the mid 5th century. The temple complex was designed as a worldly imitation of heaven and fitted into a larger plan that evolved to include a network of roads, cities, settlement and other temples. What you see today is the product of centuries of building, rebuilding, alteration and addition, with the most recent structures dating from the late Angkorian period.

At its height the temple and nearby city formed the most important economic and political centre in the region. But despite its historic importance, the 84ha site remains in considerable danger from the elements. Detailed studies reveal that water erosion is pressuring the site and without a systematic



water management plan the buildings will eventually collapse. Italian and Japanese-funded projects have helped stabilise the southern of two ancient canals built to channel water away from the central structures. However, the equally important northern canal has collapsed completely resulting in a slow but steady destruction of the northern side of the site. To see it, compare the relatively intact terraced steps and pavilions on the south of the site with those on the north. With about US\$1 million needed to repair the northern canal and terraces, Wat Phu's future is by no means secure.

But it's not all doom and gloom. Years of work by the Italian Archaeological Mission and the inimitable Dr Patrizia Zolese, the leading expert on Wat Phu who has been working at the site since 1990, have resulted in the first detailed map on the site and surrounding 400 sq km, revealing much about the way the ancients lived. During the last two years the local and *falang* archaeologists have restored the ceremonial causeway, replacing slabs and re-erecting stone markers that had been scattered across the site. Restoration of the Nandi Hall is underway and is expected to be finished in 2009.

Don't miss the **museum** (admission with Wat Phu ticket; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) beside the ticket office. Extensive cataloguing work has recently been completed on the dozens of lintels, *nagas* (mythical water serpents), Buddhas and other stone work from Wat Phu and its associated sites. Descriptions are in English.

The Archaeological Site

Wat Phu is situated at the junction of the Mekong plain and Phu Phasak, a mountain that was sacred to local peoples centuries before the construction of any of the ruins now visible. The original Austro-Asiatic tribes living in this area undoubtedly paid respect to animist spirits associated with the mountain and its rock shelter spring.

The archaeological site itself is divided into six terraces on three main levels joined by a long, stepped promenade flanked by statues of lions and *nagas*.

LOWER LEVEL

A modern sala built by Chao Boun Oum in the 1960s stood at the western side of the great *baray* (ceremonial pond; *nāwng sá* in Lao) until it was dismantled recently,

revealing the sandstone base of the ancient main entrance. From here begins a causeway-style ceremonial promenade, sided by two *baray*. Parts of both the northern and southern *baray* still fill with water, lotus flowers and the odd buffalo during the wet season and the site looks better since the stone markers lining the promenade have been re-erected.

MIDDLE LEVEL

The middle section features two exquisitely carved, **quadrangular pavilions** built of sandstone and laterite. Believed to date from the mid 10th or early 11th century, the style resembles Koh Ker in Cambodia. Some people (but not the Unesco experts) suggest these pavilions were used for gender-segregated worship and they are sometimes called 'lady pavilion' and 'man pavilion'.

Wat Phu was converted into a Buddhist site in later centuries but much of the original Hindu sculpture remains in the lintels, which feature various forms of Vishnu and Shiva. Over the western pediment of the north pavilion is a relief of Shiva and Parvati sitting on Nandi, Shiva's bull mount. The building consists of four galleries and a central open courtyard, though entry is forbidden for safety reasons.

Just behind the southern pavilion stands a smaller building known as the **Nandi Hall** (dedicated to Shiva's mount) and two collapsed galleries flanking a set of laterite steps leading to the next level. From the Nandi Hall an ancient royal road once lead south for about 1.3km to Ho Nang Sida (see p268), and eventually to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Six ruined brick shrines – only their bases remain – separate the lower two levels from the final and holiest level. Roots and mosses hold the bricks together in some places, and drive them apart in others.

An impressive **dvarapala** (sentinel figure) stands ramrod straight with sword held at the ready near what was once a *gopura* (ornate entranceway). If you step down off the walkway and onto the grassy area just north of here you'll come to the remains of a **yonip pedestal**, the cosmic vagina-womb symbol associated with Shaivism. Very near the yoni lie two unusually large, headless and armless **dvarapala statues** half-buried in the grass. These are the largest dvarapala found anywhere in the former Angkorian kingdom.

CHAMPASAK IN ANTIQUITY

Under the palm trees and rice paddies 4km south of Champasak town is the remains of a city that was, about 1500 years ago, the capital of the Mon-Khmer Chenla kingdom. The site is known today as Muang Kao (Old City), but scholars believe it was called Shrestapura.

Aerial photographs show the remains of a rectangular city measuring 2.3km by 1.8km, surrounded by double earthen walls on three sides and protected on the east by the Mekong River. Other traces of the old city include small *baray* (a Khmer word meaning 'pond', usually used for ritual purposes), the foundations for circular brick monuments, evidence of an advanced system of irrigation, various Hindu statuary and stone carvings (including a lintel in the style of 7th-century Sambor Prei Kuk), stone implements and ceramics. The sum of all this is an extremely rare example of an ancient urban settlement in Southeast Asia, one whose design reveals how important religious belief was in the workings of everyday life.

The origin of the city remained a mystery until Southeast Asia's oldest Sanskrit inscription was discovered here. The 5th-century stele stated the city was founded by King Devanika and was called Kuruksetra and also mentions the auspicious Sri Lingaparvata nearby, a clear reference to the mountain near Wat Phu Champasak. 'Honoured since antiquity', the mountain was believed to be the residence or the manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva, and even today local people honour the mountain as the place of Phi Intha (the soul or protecting spirit of the mountain).

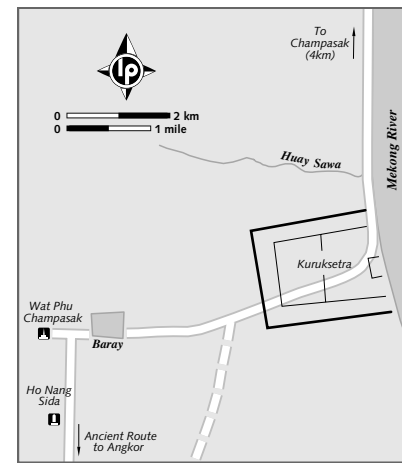
By the end of the 5th century the city was thriving. It continued as a major regional centre until at least the 7th century, as shown by two Nandi pedestal (Shiva's bull mount) sculptures discovered in 1994-95 bearing inscriptions by King Citrasena-Mahendrarman, the 'conqueror' who later shifted the kingdom's capital to Sambor Prei Kuk in northeast Cambodia. Archaeological material suggests the city was inhabited until the 16th century.

Ongoing research by Dr Zolese (p265) and her team has revealed that a second city was built near Wat Phu after the 9th century. She believes the Nang Sida temple (p268) was at the centre of this city, which was probably Lingapura, a place mentioned in many ancient inscriptions but which has not been categorically identified by modern scholars.

A steep *naga* stairway leads onwards to the sanctuary and probably dates from the 11th century. It is lined with *dawk jampqa* (plumelia or frangipani), the Lao national tree.

UPPER LEVEL

On the uppermost level is the sanctuary itself, which once enclosed a Shiva lingam that was bathed – via a system of stone pipes – by waters from the sacred spring above and behind the complex. A lintel inside the southern entrance depicts the story of Krishnavatara in which Krishna kills his uncle Kamsa. The sanctuary now contains a set of unsophisticated-looking Buddha images on an altar. The brick



rear section, which might have been built in the 9th century, is a *cella* (cell), where the holy linga was kept.

Sculpted into a large boulder behind the main sanctuary is a Khmer-style **Trimurti**, the Hindu holy trinity of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Further back, beyond some terracing, is the cave from which the holy spring flowed into the sanctuary.

East of the sanctuary and a newer wat building a winding path leads north to the so-called **crocodile stone**, a boulder with a deep, highly stylised carving of a croc that is believed to date from the Angkor period. Crocodiles were semi-god figures in Khmer

culture, but despite much speculation that the sculpture was used for human sacrifices its function, if there was one, remains unknown. Further along the same path is the **elephant stone**, a huge boulder bearing the likeness of an elephant thought to date from the 16th century. Nearby you can see remains of a stone **meditation cella**.

When you've seen everything here, just sitting and soaking up the wide-angle view of the *baray*, the plains and the Mekong is fantastic, especially in the morning before the hordes arrive.

Other Sites Associated with Wat Phu

South of Wat Phu are three smaller Angkor-era sites in very poor condition that will mainly interest die-hard fans of Khmer architecture. Each of the three stands beside the ancient road to Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

An easy 1.3km walk to the south of Wat Phu – stick to the trail heading south from the terraced promenade because there are some landmines in the area – stands **Ho Nang Sida** ('Lady Sida Hall', a reference to a local legend unrelated to the monument's original function). Its exact function is uncertain, though it probably dates from the early 10th century and might have been the central shrine for a second ancient city.

A further kilometre south stands another rubble pile, **Hong Tha Tao** (Lord Turtle Room). This structure, or what's left of it, resembles hospitals built during the reign of Khmer King Jayavarman VII in the 13th century, so it might have been there to serve as a hospital for ill pilgrims.

Another few kilometres on, close to the village of Ban That, stand three Khmer *prasat* (square-based brick stupas) reminiscent of similar tripartite monuments in Thailand's Lopburi. No doubt symbolic of the Hindu Trimurti of Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu, the towers are believed to date from the 11th century and were likely never completed; they are in poor condition. A large, dried-up *baray* can be seen nearby. Ban That can be reached by jumbo from Champasak or Ban Thong Khop.

Festivals

The highlight of the year in Champasak is the three-day Bun Wat Phu Champasak (Wat Phu Champasak Festival), held as part of Magha Puja (Makha Busa) during the full moon of the third lunar month – usually in February.

The central ceremonies performed are Buddhist, culminating on the full-moon day with an early-morning file of monks receiving alms food from the faithful, followed that evening by a candle-lit *wien thien* (circumambulation) of the lower shrines.

Throughout the three days of the festival Lao visitors climb around the hillside, stopping to pray and leave offerings of flowers and incense. The festival is more commercial than it once was and for much of the time has an atmosphere somewhere between a kids carnival and music festival. Events include Thai boxing matches, cockfights, comedy shows, and plenty of music and dancing. Food is available from vendors who set up along the road from Ban Thong Khop, and after dark several areas are cordoned off for open-air nightclubs featuring bands from as far away as Vientiane. After dark the beer and *lào-lào* (rice whisky) flow freely and the atmosphere can become rather rowdy.

Getting There & Away

Wat Phu Champasak is 46km from Pakse, 12km from Ban Phaphin and 10km from Champasak. A shared jumbo from Champasak to Ban Thong Khop, the village opposite Wat Phu, should cost about US\$0.50 per person. More likely you'll have to haggle with a *sāamlāaw* or tuk-tuk driver who will do the return trip for about US\$6 to US\$8. Cycling is also popular, but there's not much shade so it pays to get going early.

DON DAENG

Stretched out like an old croc sunning itself in the middle of the Mekong, Don Daeng is a little like an island that time forgot. It's classic middle Mekong, with eight villages scattered around its edge and rice fields in the middle. The small and mostly shaded track that runs around the edge of the 8km-long island is mercifully free of cars – bicycles, slow-moving motorbikes and the odd *dok dok* (mini tractor) are all the transport that's required.

The remains of a square-based brick *prasat* in the centre of the island and another, hiding under the *sim* at **Wat Ban Boung Kham**, suggest the island has been inhabited since Khmer times, at least. But the attraction of Don Daeng is more about just soaking up village life. Walking or cycling around you'll find people refreshingly welcoming.

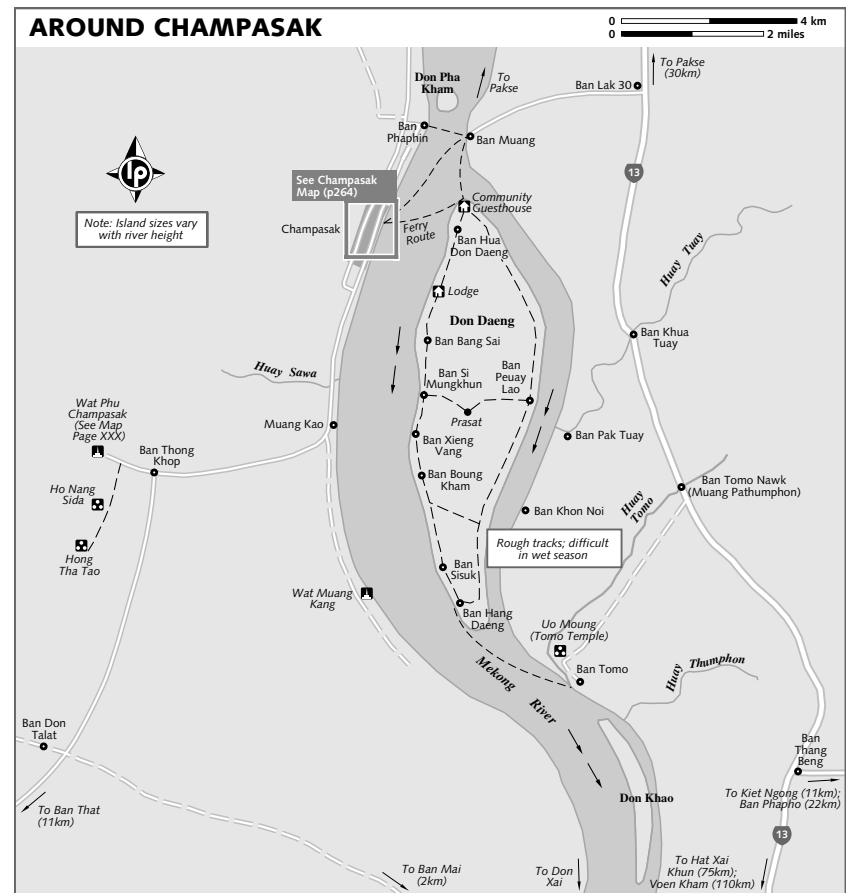
While life on Don Daeng is much as it has been for decades, the introduction of tourism will threaten that somewhat. The village elders told us specifically that they don't want Don Daeng to go the way of Don Det (p276). That means they don't want *falang* openly smoking spliffs or getting overly amorous in public, and women are asked to wear sarongs when they bath, not bikinis; ditto for sunbathing. As you are a guest in their village, please respect these requests.

The village of **Hua Don Daeng**, at the northern tip of the island, is where the first tourist accommodation has been built. The simple **community guesthouse** (dm US\$2), with two rooms and mattresses on the floor, makes

the perfect base from which to visit Wat Phu Champasak and Uo Moung. There is a bathroom with bucket shower, but we recommend bathing in the Mekong. Delicious meals (US\$2 per meal, US\$1.50 for three people or more) are prepared by the villagers, who also rent out bikes. Village homestays (p48) are possible.

A more upmarket **lodge** (☎ 020-559 8719; r incl breakfast US\$40; 🏠), on the riverbank facing Wat Phu and complete with 24 attractive rooms and a pool, is set to open soon, when Don Daeng is connected to the electricity grid.

To get to Don Daeng take a small boat from Ban Muang or Champasak for US\$2 between December and May, or US\$3 from June to November (when the trip takes more



fuel). The **Champasak District Visitor Information Office** (p262) in Champasak can arrange boats and will let the villagers know you're coming, as will the **Provincial Tourism Office** in Pakse (p255).

UO MOUNG (TOMO TEMPLE)

ອູ້ມອງ (ັດໂຕ໊ໂມ) ເມັ

The Khmer temple ruin of **Uo Moung** (Tomo Temple; admission US\$1; ☎ 7.30am-4.30pm) is thought to have been built late in the 9th century during the reign of the Khmer King Yasovarman I. It's about 45km south of Pakse off Rte 13 in a wonderfully shaded forest beside a small tributary of the Mekong. The exact function of the temple is unknown, though its orientation towards the holy mountain Phu Pasak suggests its location was somehow related to Wat Phu.

The ruins include an entranceway bordered by distance markers (often mistaken for lingas) and two crumbling *gopura* (ornate entranceways). The more intact of the *gopura* contains an unusual lingam-style stone post on which two faces have been carved. It's unusual because a common *mukhalinga* has four faces (*mukha*), while most ordinary linga have no face at all. Several sandstone lintels are displayed on rocks beneath towering dipterocarp trees, but the best examples of lintels from this site are in the Champasak Historical Heritage Museum in Pakse (p256). The white building at the heart of the site houses a bronze Sukhothai-style Buddha.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to Uo Muong is by boat from Don Daeng, Ban Muang (the village on the far side of the Mekong from Champasak) or Champasak. You can charter a boat to Ban Tomo (the riverbank village about 400m south of the ruins) for about US\$12 return, including waiting time of an hour or so while you locate and tour the ruins. Prices fall as the boat distance gets shorter, so riding a bicycle to Ban Sisouk at the south end of Don Daeng and taking a boat from there is cheapest (US\$4 return).

From Ban Tomo, climb the riverbank and walk north through the village, following the road right, then left. The temple is in a forest; if in doubt, ask the kids along the way. The ruins can also be reached by vehicle from Pakse by turning west just before Km 42.

By boat, you could combine a trip to Uo Muong with a stop at Wat Muang Kang on the

west bank of the Mekong. Another option is to rent a bike on Don Daeng, take it by boat first to Uo Moung, then Wat Muang Kang, and ride the riverside path back to Champasak.

KIET NGONG & BAN PHAPHO

ບ້ານຜາໂພງກຸງອູ້ງ

At the edge of the Se Pian NPA, the mainly Lao Loum villagers of Kiet Ngong have had a centuries-long relationship with elephants. The elephants have traditionally worked moving logs or doing heavy work in the rice fields. Typically each elephant has a different owner and in many cases the relationship between owner and pachyderm has existed for the majority of both lives. But as elephants are expensive to keep and machines now do much of their traditional work, the village has turned to tourism to help pay their way.

Kiet Ngong is at the edge of a wetland 11km from Rte 13 and is also home to Kingfisher Eco-Lodge (see opposite), one of Laos's first real eco-lodges. The wetland is used by an unusually large herd of buffalo and more than 90 species of bird have been sighted.

Almost everyone who comes to Kiet Ngong takes the elephant ride to the summit of a hill called **Phu Asa**, named for a group of 19th-century nationalists who fought against the Siamese. The flat-topped hill is topped by an expansive archaeological site. Unmortared slate-brick columns, topped by larger slabs, stand about 2m high and enclose a rectangular space about 180m long and 50m wide. At the centre of the site is a crumbling and overgrown temple. At its far end a trail leads down to a Buddha footprint. The site has a Stone Henge feel to it but, contrary to what the locals will tell you, the columns are probably not 1000 years old.

From the top you can see across the wetlands and vast swathes of forest, though the 90-minute elephant trek (US\$10 per elephant) follows a steep laterite road rather than a forest path. Talk of making a new and infinitely more attractive forest trail may have come to something by the time you arrive. Either way, you could hire a guide and walk up and back through the forest (US\$4 per four people or less).

Guides can be found at the new **Visitor Information Centre** (☎ 030-534 6547) at the entrance to the village, built as part of the Asian Development Bank's pro-poor tourism initiative, designed to bring tourist dollars to some of

the poorest communities in the country. The centre arranges elephant rides and local accommodation (see below), and has information about the local area and Se Pian NPA. If telephoning for information ask a Lao speaker to call for you.

About 15km east of Kiet Ngong along a road devastated by logging trucks is the Suay village of **Ban Phapho** (22km east of Rte 13), a traditional breeding centre for working elephants. However, elephant breeding appears to be a dying art because the mahouts of Kiet Ngong and Ban Phapho won't let their female elephants mate for fear they will wind up with broken hips (not uncommon, apparently). The owners just can't risk the loss of income. Clearly this isn't a sustainable policy, but no-one seemed to have any alternative plan when we asked.

Ban Phapho itself is old and quite attractive. Mr Bounhome, who runs the only guesthouse (see below), arranges elephant rides (US\$10) or can take you to watch the elephants working (US\$7, in season). At either village it's worth arriving early or calling ahead as it takes a couple of hours to fetch and prepare the elephants.

Sleeping & Eating

Kiet Ngong might seem an unlikely place for one of Laos's first real eco-lodges, but that is exactly what opened there in 2006. Run by a Lao-Italian family, **Kingfisher Eco-Lodge** (☎ 030-534 5016; www.kingfisherecolodge.com; r US\$16-48) is set on 7ha at the edge of a wetland, about 700m east of Kiet Ngong. It's a beautiful spot and sitting on the balcony at dawn, watching a herd of buffalo splash their way across the wetland while mahouts ride their elephants towards work is memorable.

Activities include various elephant rides, bird watching (November to January is best), mountain biking, trekking by foot and even a day-long course to learn how to become a mahout (US\$50 for two people). It's also the best place to arrange the Ta Ong trek into Se Pian NPA (right) because they have the most knowledgeable English-speaking guide. There are four classy bungalows (US\$43/48 low/high season), and four eco-rooms (that's 'eco' for economy; US\$13/16 low/high season), which are nice enough with spotless share bathrooms, but have paper-thin walls. Lights and hot water are solar powered. The highlight is the restaurant and bar, which could easily be in an East African safari lodge.

On the far side of the village, a 15-minute walk through rice fields, are five basic and rundown **community-run bungalows** (US\$4). The location is fantastic, but the bungalows are not. Instead, get the villagers to set up your mattress and mosquito net on the sala overlooking the wetland. Homestays for US\$2 per person are also possible. Arrange either at the Visitor Information Centre (opposite) – for bungalows say '*heuan pak*', for homestay say 'homestay'.

In Ban Phapho, the **Boun Home Guest House** (☎ 030-534 6293; per bed US\$1.50) has small, ultra-simple rooms in an authentic wooden house. The bathroom is shared and there's no hot water, but Mr Bounhome and his family are welcoming and speak some English and French. Order meals of *laap* (US\$2) and *khào niaw* in advance.

Getting There & Away

Kiet Ngong and Ban Phapho are off diabolical Rte 18A that runs east from Ban Thang Beng, 48km south of Pakse on Rte 13, to Attapeu. The turn-off for Kiet Ngong is about 8.5km east of Rte 13 and the village is 1.8km further south. For Ban Phapho, continue along Rte 18 and soon after the Kiet Ngong turn-off take the right fork; it's about 15km along this road. These roads are easily travelled on 110cc motorbikes and should be passable, if difficult, most of the year.

Cheaper are *sǎwngthǎew* (US\$2, 1½ to 2½ hours) that leave Kiet Ngong at about 8am. From Ban Phapho *sǎwngthǎew* leave at 8am and 9am (sometimes only one runs). If you miss the 8am from Kiet Ngong, you should be able to jump on one of these when they pass on Rte 18. These same *sǎwngthǎew* return from Pakse's southern bus terminal between about noon and 2pm; Kiet Ngong is often misunderstood so ask instead for 'Phu Asa'.

Alternatively, board anything going south on Rte 13, get off at Ban Thang Beng and wait for transport bumping its way east.

SE PIAN NPA

ປ່າສະຫງວນແຫ່ງຊາດເຊປຽນ

Se Pian NPA is one of the most important protected areas in Laos. Stretching between Rte 18 in the north, Rte 13 to the west and the Cambodian border in the south, the 2400 sq km is fed by three major rivers, the Se Pian, Se Khampho and Se Kong. It boasts globally

significant populations of tiger, banteng, Asiatic black bear, yellow-cheeked crested gibbon and gaur, among others. It's also home to many birds, including the rare sarus crane and vulture, and hornbill species.

The reason Se Pian's wildlife population is so significant (unlike most other NPAs) is that barely anyone lives here, so the wildlife hasn't been hunted to the verge of extinction. The most southern permanent settlement is the ethnic Lavae (commonly known as Brou) village of **Ta Ong**, and it's in this extremely poor village that you'll stay if you do the two-day Ta Ong trek. This is the hardest of the treks we've done in Laos, but it's the only way to get into this way-off-the-beaten-track part of Se Pian. Much of the five-hour first day involves barely visible trails and wading through streams.

The villagers' belief system is a mix of animism and Buddhism and, if our experience is anything to go by, they know how to have fun – especially the guy playing the *kaen*, a bamboo instrument that looks like a long pan-flute but sounds more like a piano accordion.

The second day starts with a fantastic dawn walk through the forest. If you're lucky you might hear the haunting call of rare yellow-cheeked gibbons. After breakfast you can choose an easy one-hour walk and boat trip, or a steamy three-hour bush bash via a spectacular natural viewpoint.

You can book the trek (dry season only) through either the Provincial Tourism Office in Pakse (p255) or Kingfisher Eco-lodge in Kiet Ngong (p271). The latter trek costs a little more but includes an excellent English-speaking guide. There's no electricity in Ta Ong so bring a torch (flashlight).

SI PHAN DON (FOUR THOUSAND ISLANDS)

ສີພັນດອນ

There must be some rule in Laos that says the further south you go the more relaxed it becomes, because just when you thought your blood pressure couldn't drop any more, you arrive in Si Phan Don... The name literally means 'Four Thousand Islands', and the few you are likely to visit on this scenic 50km-long stretch of the Mekong are so chilled you're liable to turn into a hammock-bound icicle.

During the rainy season this section of the Mekong fills out to a breadth of 14km, the river's widest reach along its 4350km journey from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China

Sea. During the dry months between monsoons the river recedes and leaves behind hundreds (or thousands if you count every sand bar) of islands and islets. The largest of the permanent islands are inhabited year round and offer fascinating glimpses of tranquil river-oriented village life – 'more detached from time than from the riverbank' as one source described it. Communities tend to be self-sufficient, growing most of their own rice, sugar cane, coconut and vegetables, catching fish and weaving textiles as needed.

Island life is changing, however, and electricity and tourism are the big drivers. Don Khong attracts travellers looking for better lodgings while Don Det has become one of Southeast Asia's backpacker magnets, with all that entails; Don Khon falls somewhere in between. Power pylons are slowly being erected and Don Khong is on the grid, though Don Det and Don Khon will have to wait until at least 2008. In the meantime most homes are linked to one generator or another and at night you'll see extended families sitting glued to the new-found joy of Thai soap opera.

The villages of Si Phan Don are often named for their position at the upriver or downriver ends of their respective islands. The upriver end is called *hūa* (head), the downriver end is called *hāng* (tail). Hence Ban Hua Khong is at the northern end of Don Khong, while Ban Hang Khong is at the southern end.

The French left behind a defunct short railway (the only railway ever actually completed in Laos), a couple of river piers, and a few colonial buildings. Other attractions include some impressive rapids and the Khon Phapheng (p282) waterfall, where the Mekong suddenly drops in elevation at the Cambodian border. The increasingly rare Irrawaddy dolphin (p279) also likes to hang out in the Mekong south of the falls.

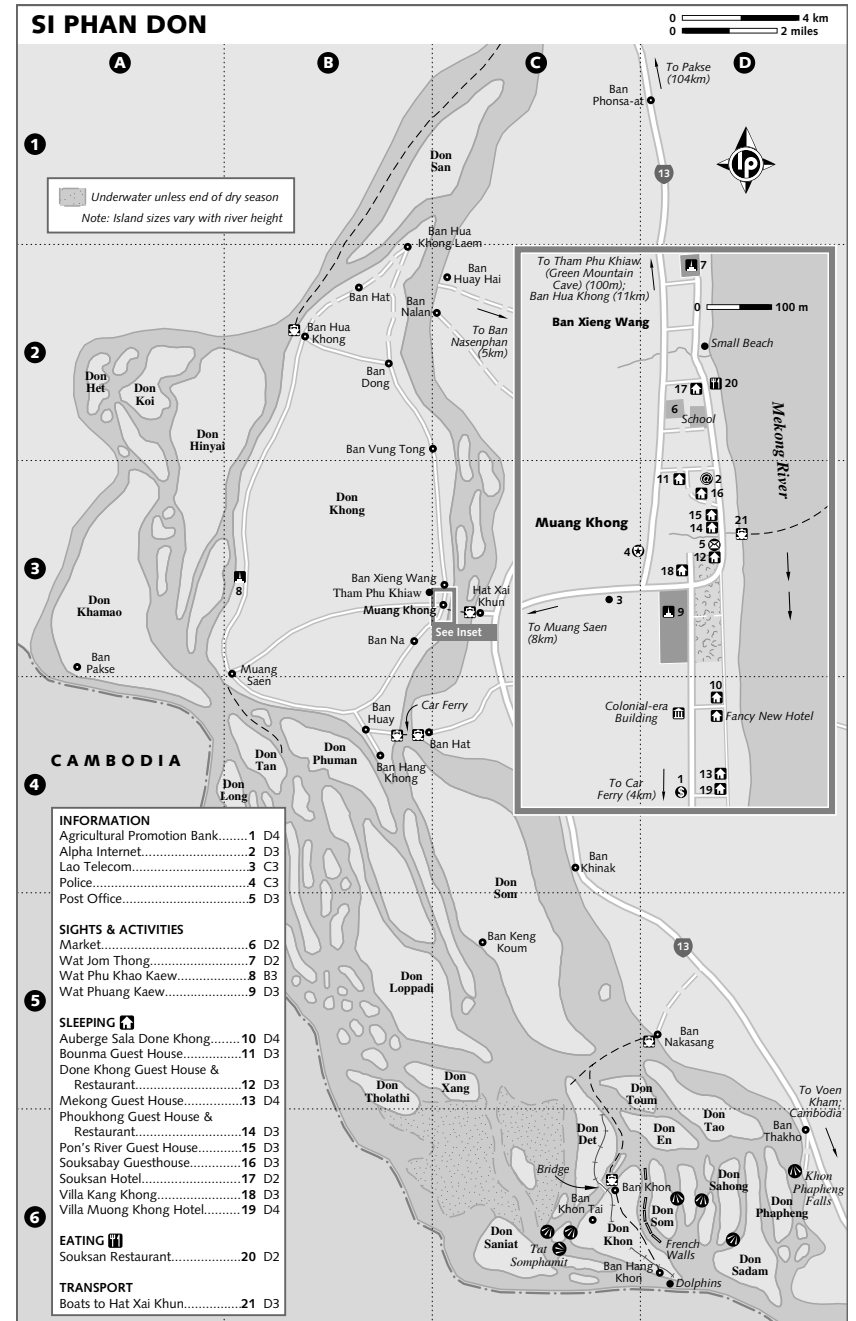
Don Khong (Khong Island)

ດອນໂຂງ

☎ 031 / pop 13,000

Named for the surrounding river (using the Thai pronunciation *khaeng* rather than the Lao *khāwng*), this large island measures 18km long by 8km at its widest point. Most of the islanders live in and around two villages, Muang Khong on the eastern shore and Muang Saen on the west; an 8km road links the two.

Even in Laos, where 'sleepy' seems an almost universal adjective where provincial



towns are concerned, **Muang Khong** is the very definition of the sleepy district capital. Life moves slowly here, like a boat being paddled against the flow on the Mekong, and you'll seldom be disturbed by a vehicle. It's no party town – keep going south for that – but the torpid pace of life here and the sights around the island make it an attractive place to spend a day or two, getting about on a bicycle or motorbike or just chilling by the river.

As his surname suggests, the postman who went on to become president of Laos, Khamtay Siphandone, was born in Si Phan Don in 1924 – in Ban Hua Khong at the north end of Don Khong, to be exact. His family are quite influential here though tales that he is seeing out his retirement on the island are apparently untrue.

INFORMATION

The police are a block back from the river in Muang Khong. If you get sick, head for Pakse or Thailand.

Agricultural Promotion Bank (☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) South of town, this bank offers poor if not terrible rates for US dollars and Thai baht cash and travellers cheques, for which there is also a US\$1 charge per cheque.

Alpha Internet (☎ 214117; per hr US\$6; ☎ 8am-9pm) Also burns CDs and offers international phone calls at US\$1 per minute.

Lao Telecom On the road to Muang Saen.
Post office Just south of the bridge.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Don Khong is quite scenic; with rice fields and low hills in the centre and vegetable gardens around the perimeter, punctuated by small villages, most of which have their own wats. Bicycle or motorbike is the best way to explore it.

Muang Khong is dominated by **Wat Phuang Kaew** and its towering modern 'naga protected' Buddha image facing east. The locals believe the abbot used supernatural powers gained in meditation to defeat government efforts to oust him after the Revolution. Elsewhere in Muang Khong, the **market** is fascinating between 4.30am and 6.30am, when people come from throughout the islands to buy and sell. Many come by boat and getting yourself down to the **small beach** at dawn to watch the boats unload their fish, fowl and other fare is a fantastic way to start the day. Take your camera and a tripod.

At Ban Xieng Wang, a neighbourhood at the northern end of Muang Khong, is **Wat Jom Thong** the oldest temple on the island. Dating from the Chao Anou period (1805–28), the main *sim* features a unique cruciform floor plan in crumbling brick and stucco with a tile roof. Carved wooden window shutters are a highlight, and an old wooden standing Buddha in one-handed *abhaya mudra* (offering protection) is notable. The sandy wat grounds are shaded by coconut and betel palms and mango trees.

A kilometre or so north of Muang Khong, in some hills more or less behind the mayor's office, a trail leads to **Tham Phu Khiaw** (Green Mountain Cave). The cave – actually more of an overhanging ledge – contains some old Buddha images and is the object of local pilgrimages during Lao New Year in April. To find it, head north from Muang Khong for 1.5km and take a track to the left, through a banana plantation. It's only a 15-minute walk (mostly uphill) to the cave entrance, marked by two tree trunks, but the track isn't always obvious – it's best to get a local to guide you.

Muang Saen, on the opposite side of the island from Muang Khong, is a bustling little town with boats servicing the islands to the west of Don Khong that have no road access whatsoever. **Wat Phu Khao Kaew**, on a low hill north of Muang Saen (about 5km from the junction of the north-south and east-west roads), was built on the site of some Khmer ruins. It is believed to be home to a *naga*, though the entrance to its lair is covered. Look for a stand of frangipani trees on the eastern side of the hill to locate the path to the temple, or hire a motorcycle taxi in Muang Saen for around US\$2 return.

Two smaller villages at the southern tip of the island worth visiting for old wats are **Ban Huay** and **Ban Hang Khong**.

TOURS

The luxurious **Vat Phou** (www.asian-oasis.com), a 34m steel-hulled barge-cum-hotel has 12 wooden staterooms with single berths and western bathrooms. A three-day, two-night trip between Pakse and Don Khong takes in Wat Phu Champasak, Uo Moung and Khon Phapheng Falls. Fares vary, but are roughly US\$414 per person from May to October (when there is only one trip per week), and US\$538 at other times (three per week). For

bookings, go to the website, or to the office in Pakse (p255).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

A boat racing festival (Bun Suang Heua or Bun Nam) is held on Don Khong in early December around National Day – usually the first or second weekend. Four or five days of carnival-like activity culminate in races opposite Muang Khong, much closer to the shore than in larger towns.

SLEEPING

Muang Khong has the best range of accommodation anywhere in the islands and standards are significantly higher than those on Don Det or Don Khon. They are all on, or just back from, the riverbank along a 700m-stretch. Most rent bicycles for US\$1 per day and have attached restaurants (see Eating, right).

Souksan Hotel (☎ 212071; r US\$4-35; ☎ ☑) About 250m north of the bridge, Souksan has spotlessly clean rooms in a range of buildings jammed onto a block about 30m back from the river. The wooden fan-conditioned bungalows are good value at US\$4 or US\$5 each. The US\$30 to US\$35 rooms which include breakfast and air-con are grossly overpriced, if you go without these extras, the rate drops to just US\$6! Unfortunately there's no real communal area.

Souksabay Guesthouse (☎ 214122; r US\$5-10; ☎) Just back from the main road, the Souksabay's six rooms are clean and decent enough, if a little dark. But the welcoming owner and garden setting make up for that.

Villa Kang Khong (☎ 213539; r US\$5-10; ☎) If being laid back was a palpable thing, you'd be able to feel it here. The traditional teak house is a favourite for its easy, convivial atmosphere, large and clean rooms and shaded communal balcony (that guests actually use) where you can enjoy breakfast. Fan rooms are US\$5 to US\$7 and most rooms are different, so ask to see a few. The owner speaks a little French.

Done Khong Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 214010; r US\$6-12; ☎) In a prime position just south of the bridge, the upstairs fan-rooms open onto a balcony and are good value at US\$6; but the downstairs rooms are a bit pricey.

Pon's River Guest House (☎ 214037, 020-2270037; r US\$6-20; ☎) At this guesthouse just north of the bridge, English-speaking Mr Pon is full of useful information and can sell you transport

to almost anywhere you like. His 18 clean rooms are fair value, particularly the US\$6 fan rooms. The US\$20 rooms have satellite TV. Good option.

Auberge Sala Done Khong (☎ /fax 212077; www.salalao.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$23/28; ☎ ☑) About 250m south of the bridge and part of the Auberges Sala Lao chain, these two French-era teak mansions are atmospheric, but the rooms could be better; ask to see several. Prices drop US\$5 from May to September.

Villa Muong Khong Hotel (☎ 213051; www.xbtravel-vlmkhotel.laopdr.com; r incl breakfast US\$30/35; ☎ ☑) About 450m south of the bridge, this place is spread through four buildings all squeezed onto one riverfront site. The 40 rooms can differ much more significantly than the prices suggest, so it pays to look at a few – Block A is best. This hotel popular with tour groups, and French and English are spoken.

Other options include the **Mekong Guest House** (☎ /fax 213668; r US\$4-15; ☎ ☑), which has simple fan-rooms and pricier air-con rooms; the **Bounma Guest House** (r US\$3), about 50m down a lane north of Pon's, which is fair value if you can find someone to rent you a room; and the **Phoukhong Guesthouse & Restaurant** (☎ 213673; r US\$3), just next to Pon's, which has small, clean rooms with cold-water bathrooms.

What promises to be the fanciest place in town was nearing completion when we passed. Just south of the Auberge Sala Done Khong, the location is great, the rooms are big and there was no shortage of style.

EATING

Apart from the odd place selling *fœe* and Lao snacks, all the eating options are restaurants attached to the aforementioned accommodation. In them you can try Don Khong's famous *lào-lào* (rice whisky), which is often cited as the smoothest in the country.

Phoukhong Restaurant (meals US\$1-3; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This restaurant next to Pon's has a virtually identical menu of cheap and tasty local dishes, with an emphasis on fresh river fish. The riverside setting is popular.

Done Khong Guest House & Restaurant (meals US\$1.50-3; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) In an appealing position by the river, this place serves tasty Lao dishes such as *lâap* (US\$1.50), the mysterious 'soup with chicken gallingly root' (US\$1.50), and various rice dishes.

Pon's (meals US\$1.50-3.50; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Pon's fresh river fish are worth a shot;

the steamed fish in banana leaf is particularly good. A large menu that includes reasonable Lao, Thai and backpacker food, an attractive riverfront setting (and the nearby guesthouses) make this a travellers' favourite.

Souksan Restaurant (meals US\$2-5; ☎ 7am-10pm) In a building overhanging the river, Souksan serves a range of Chinese, Lao, Thai and comfort food including (allegedly) a Sunday roast lunch (US\$5).

Villa Muong Khong Hotel (meals US\$2-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This airy restaurant has an intimate ambience and the Lao and Western dishes are among the best on the island. Worth the walk.

Auberge Sala Don Khong (meals US\$2.50-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) The Lao and European fare here is enjoyable and the setting romantic by Don Khong standards; the speciality is *mók pqa* (fish steamed with herbs in banana leaves, US\$3.50) and it's worth trying. Non-guests should give an hour's notice.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boat

The slow boat to Pakse is dead. RIP. There was some talk that a semi-regular boat might start running during the tourist high season, but don't count on it. If it starts, Mr Pon will know the details.

There are regular boats between Hat Xai Khun and Don Khong; it's US\$3 per boat for one to three people, or US\$1.50 per person for more. Bargaining is futile. The boatman will take you as near as possible to your guesthouse of choice. The vehicle ferry between Ban Hat and Ban Na charges US\$0.10 per pedestrian, US\$0.50 per motorcycle and US\$2.50 per car/van/pick-up.

Seven-seat boats (with roofs) can be hired to Don Det and Don Khon (US\$15, 1½ hours), though getting to Don Khon in the dry season will require a smaller boat. Mr Pon also runs a daily service to Don Det and Don Khon (US\$4 per person), leaving at 8.30am.

Bus, Săwngthăew & Minibus

Săwngthăew and buses head to Pakse (US\$3.50 or US\$4, 2½ to 3½ hours, 128km) at about 6am, 7am and 8am. After that, head over to Rte 13 and wait for anything going north.

To Voeng Kham and the Cambodian border, get across to Rte 13 and wait for buses coming south from Pakse; they usually pass between 8.30am and 9am and cost US\$2. Alternatively,

take a tuk-tuk all the way from Hat Xai Khun for about US\$10 per vehicle.

Finally, Pon's River Guest House and the Souksan Hotel have air-con minibuses that run daily to Pakse for US\$7, linking if you choose with a VIP bus to Vientiane (US\$20). They can also be chartered to Pakse (US\$60), the Thai border at Chong Mek (US\$80) or Voeng Kham.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycles (US\$1 per day) and motorbikes (US\$10 per day) can be hired from guesthouses and elsewhere along the main street. Alternatively, haggle with a jumbo driver.

Don Det & Don Khon

ດອນເດດ/ດອນຄອນ

Life on Don Det and Don Khon feels so laid back that you could imagine the islands just drifting downriver into Cambodia with barely anyone rolling out of their hammock in the process. Vang Vieng, the town most often compared with these two islands, feels like the Glastonbury Festival by comparison.

But in the few years since we first came here Don Det, in particular, has become a lot more rock'n'roll. From a couple of ultra-basic guesthouses and no electricity Ban Hua Det, at the north end of the island, has emerged as a sort of backpacker tractor beam. This market is serviced by generator-driven music and TV, pool tables and restaurant-bars where travellers make *anything* 'happy' – 'happy' mash potatoes, 'Happy' Lao coffee – for an extra US\$0.50. We didn't notice any *Friends* but you get the feeling it's only a matter of time.

The islanders are mainly happy to have the income tourism brings, but they are aware enough of the potential changes to cite Vang Vieng as an example of what they *don't* want to become. Having a spliff is part of travelling and the locals we spoke with seemed to have accepted the arrival of marijuana in Ban Hua Det, but they'd prefer it was an incidental part of your visit rather than your sole reason for coming. They are not, however, that pleased about the arrival of harder drugs, worrying about the influence on their kids. Wherever you are it's polite to ask before you light up.

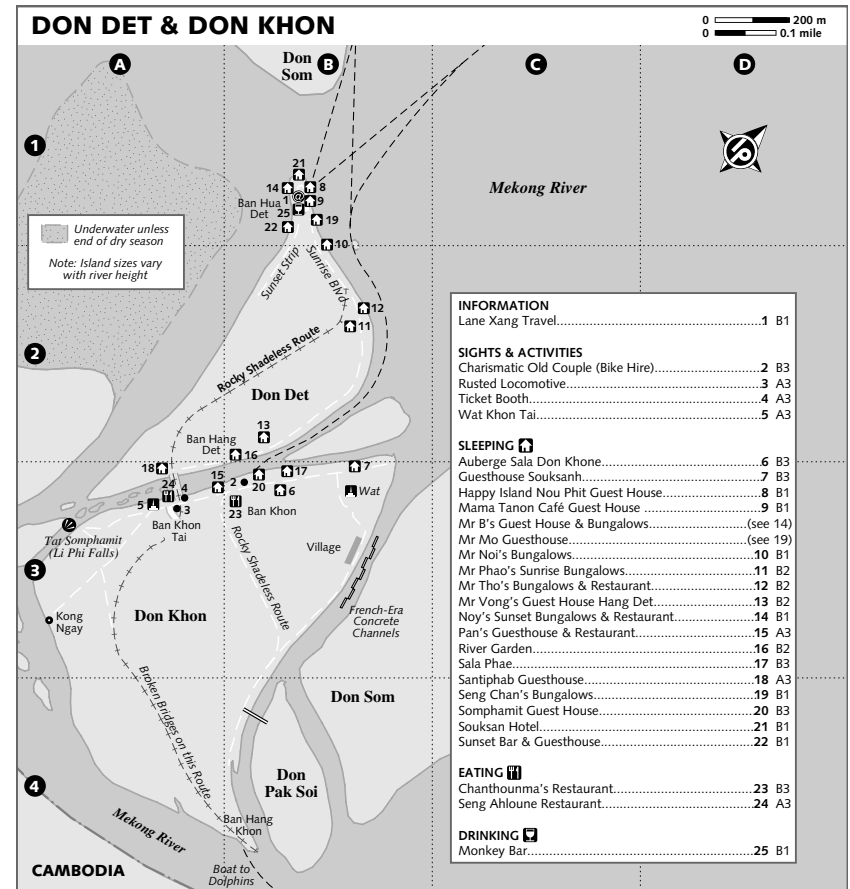
If this isn't your scene don't scratch the islands off your itinerary yet. Respite is only a short walk away and it's on Don Khon, or at the guesthouses along the southern bank of

Don Det, where things are much more serene. This is more what the islands were like when people were first drawn to them, with a sort of timeless beauty best appreciated by riding a bicycle around the few sights, swinging in a hammock, reading a book and chatting with locals and travellers alike.

The islands were an important link for supply lines between Saigon and Laos during the French colonial era. In order to bypass the rapids and waterfalls in the Mekong River, the French built a narrow-gauge railway across the two islands, linked by an attractive arched bridge and terminating in concrete piers at either end. Small engines pulled cargo across the islands but the French dream of making the Mekong a highway to China never really

materialised. The bridge and piers remain but no engine has run since WWII, and most of the track has long since been carted off. A press report in early 2007 said the Lao government was planning to rebuild the historic railway, though it's hard to understand why – we won't hold our breath.

Don Khon, the larger of the two islands, is famous throughout Laos for the cultivation of coconut, bamboo and kapok. In the main village, **Ban Khon**, there are several crumbling French buildings that are about 100 years old. **Wat Khon Tai**, in Ban Khon Tai, towards the southwestern end of Ban Khon, is a Lao temple built on the former site of an ancient Khmer temple, the laterite remains of which are scattered around the site.



INFORMATION

A couple of places offer slow internet for high prices. Otherwise, there is no bank, no medical services and not even a post office.

Lane Xang Travel (www.xplore-asia.com) has an office-cum-bar-cum-internet café in Ban Hua Det. They offer various boating options, including kayaking, rafting and sunset pleasure cruises, and can arrange all manner of transport, including a minibus across the Cambodian border and even a raft to get you to the border.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There are a few things to see while you're relaxing on the islands, all of which are best accessed on a bicycle hired for between US\$0.80 and US\$1 per day. The best bikes (including some bigger versions) are rented by a **charismatic old couple** on Don Khon; as he puffs on a reefer-sized rollie he'll adjust the seat to fit, check the tires and send you on your way. A booth at the south end of the bridge will charge you US\$0.90 per day to cross the bridge. The ticket is also good for Tat Somphamit. This might seem steep for crossing a bridge, but it is the one way the community can ensure tourist dollars reach the village services that most need it.

Tat Somphamit (Li Phi Falls)

ຕາດສົມພາມິດ

About 1.5km downriver from Ban Khon is a raging set of rapids known locally as Tat Somphamit but referred to by just about everyone else as Li Phi Falls. Li Phi means 'trap spirit' and locals believe the falls act as just that – a trap for bad spirits (of deceased people and animals) as they wash down the river. You'll never see locals swimming here – mixing with the dead is clearly tempting fate a little too much – and it's both culturally insensitive and dangerous to do so. Water churns through the falls at a frenetic pace, especially during the wet season, and we are aware of two travellers who have drowned here in recent years.

Much less risky but thoroughly captivating is watching local fishermen edging out to clear the enormous bamboo traps. During the early rains, a well-positioned trap can catch half a tonne of fish a day. Some traps here and elsewhere in the area have an intake almost 10m long, funnelling fish into a huge basket at its end.

The falls can be reached via the main path heading southwest out of Ban Khon, or on a smaller, shaded and more attractive path that passes through the wat and avoids the trucks full of Thai tourists and their consequent dust. There are plenty of small eat-drink shops at the falls.

Railway Hike

On Don Khon you can make an interesting 5km trek across the island by following the old rail bed. Rusting locomotives sit near either end of the line; the one about 75m from the south end of the bridge sits by what was once the rail service yard. As you head south you pass stretches of primary forest, rice fields, small villages and singing birds, eventually coming to the French loading pier. Across the river to the right is Cambodia. The rail bed is quite a rocky road and tough on a bike. An alternative path runs nearer the island's western edge. The return trip, with breaks, should take about three hours by foot.

Eastern Loop Hike

A less onerous walk or cycle takes you to the waterways at the eastern edge of Don Khon where the French built a series of concrete channels used to direct logs. The logs, usually from forests in Sainyabuli Province west of Vientiane, were usually lashed together into rafts of three. To prevent them going offcourse, a Lao 'pilot' would board the raft and steer it through the maze of islands. When they reached the critical area at the north end of Don Khon, the pilots were required to guide the raft onto a reinforced concrete wedge, thus splitting the binds and sending the logs into the channels beyond. The poor 'pilot' would jump for his life moments before impact.

You can still see the walls if you go to the shaded village at the east end of Don Khon. To get there, head northwest from the bridge and turn south about 1km along, passing through a wat and following the path through rice fields to the riverbank. As you continue south you'll see the walls opposite a small village. The path continues along the river and becomes more of a road, eventually petering out at a stream near the southern end of the island. When we did this on a bike recently, we had to turn around here because the 'bridge' consisted of nothing more than a single bamboo pole. By foot it's no problem. If you turn around here you can take another, more exposed path

across the middle of the island to get back to Ban Hua Khon.

As you come downhill towards the bamboo pole bridge you'll see a sign to **Don Pak Soi**. This island is just across the channel from Don Khon and is being developed for tourism, though when we visited it didn't have much to offer beyond some mighty big fish traps.

Dolphins

Rare Irrawaddy dolphins (see below) can sometimes be seen off the southern tip of Don Khon, mainly from December until May. Boats chartered (US\$5 per boat, maximum three people) from the old French pier at the south end of Don Khon run out to a small island that looks over a deep-water conservation zone. Viewing dolphins is best in the early morning or late afternoon.

Don't expect Flipper-style tricks from these dolphins. If they are there at all you'll see a brief flash as they surface to breathe, then they're gone.

DOLPHINS ENDANGERED

The Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*, called *pqa khaa* in Laos) is one of the Mekong River's most fascinating creatures, and one its most endangered. From the thousands that populated the Mekong and its tributaries in Cambodia and southern Laos as recently as the 1970s, it's now estimated there are less than 100 left. The surviving few live primarily along a 190km stretch of the Mekong between the border and the Cambodian town of Kratie.

The dark blue to grey cetaceans grow to 2.75m long and are recognisable by their bulging foreheads and small dorsal fins. They are unusually adaptable and can live in fresh or salt water, though they are seldom seen in the sea. The only other known populations are thought to be equally, if not more, at risk of extinction.

Among the Lao and Khmer, Irrawaddy dolphins are traditionally considered reincarnated humans and there are many stories of dolphins having saved the lives of fishermen or villagers who have fallen into the river or been attacked by crocodiles. These cultural beliefs mean neither the Lao nor the Khmer intentionally capture dolphins for food or sport.

In an attempt to crush these beliefs and to extract oil for their war machinery, the Khmer Rouge reportedly shot thousands of the dolphins in Tonle Sap, a large lake in northern Cambodia, during their 1970s reign of terror. Since then fishermen haven't actively targeted Irrawaddy dolphins, but general gill netting, grenade and dynamite fishing in Cambodia has inevitably taken its toll on the dolphins. Education has reduced the amount of explosive fishing, but unintentional gill netting remains a constant threat – dolphins need to surface and breathe every two to three minutes, and will usually drown before fishermen even know they are in the nets. As if that wasn't bad enough, eight juvenile calves died mysteriously in early 2006, suggesting water pollution is also taking its toll.

In Laos, dolphins have been seen as far north as Sekong in recent years, but you're most likely to see them in the deep-water conservation zones between 10m and 60m deep that have been established near the border, south of Don Khon. These areas are vital to the dolphins because they act as a refuge during the dry season, when river levels drop dangerously low.

Education and conservation programmes to save the dolphins continue, particularly in Cambodia, but their survival is far from guaranteed.

SLEEPING & EATING

Seemingly every farmer on Don Det has jumped aboard the bungalow bandwagon and there are now dozens of guesthouses around the edge of the island (see Not As Same, Same As They Look, p280). The greatest concentration is in Ban Hua Det at the northern tip of Don Det, which has become the place to be if you want to socialise into the night. From here a quiet footpath known as Sunset Strip leads along the northwestern edge of the island to places which are relatively quiet and, not surprisingly, have good sunset views. The rest of the accommodation is spread along the pleasant eastern shore, known as Sunrise Boulevard. If you'd prefer to be further from the crowds, head for the quieter places on the southern shore of the island.

Note that things are changing especially fast on Don Det, so if the place you're looking at isn't listed here, that doesn't necessarily mean it's no good; it might be newer and better.

NOT AS SAME, SAME AS THEY LOOK

Standards might be rising, but for now there are still plenty of bungalows on Don Khon and particularly Don Det that look basically the same and cost US\$1.50 a night. There are, however, a few things worth considering when making your choice.

Bathroom As competition intensifies guesthouses are increasingly tacking basic bathrooms onto their bungalows. These can vary, so take a look. Ditto for places with share bathrooms. If you don't want to squat, look for one with a throne.

Hammock(s) Most bungalows have balconies with hammocks, but if you're a pair it's worth checking if there is room to string up two hammocks, and if the guesthouse has a second one for you.

Location If it's the hot season and you plan on sleeping in, avoid Sunrise Blvd or anywhere facing east, where the morning sun makes your bungalow pretty toasty by 8am. By the same token, places on Sunset Strip can be oven-like in the afternoons.

Neighbours Bamboo walls are paper thin. If you need privacy look for a detached bungalow.

Roof Tin roofs are hotter than traditional palm-frond thatch roofs.

Window(s) With no electricity (yet) and therefore no fans or air-con, having two windows in your bungalow/room means that air circulation (and your night's sleep) is vastly improved.

Don Khon is home to some more up-market places, pleasant eateries on the water and a less-youthful atmosphere than Don Det; staying here is definitely a more 'Lao' experience.

Virtually all guesthouses here also serve food and drinks all day.

Coming from Ban Nakasang (see opposite) boatmen will usually drop you at your guesthouse of choice if you ask.

Don Det

Seng Chan's Bungalows (Sunrise Blvd; bungalows US\$1-2) These thatched-roofed and detached bungalows have two beds and two windows each and sit right on the river. Good choice.

Mr Noi's Bungalows (Sunrise Blvd; bungalows US\$1.50-2) These oldish bungalows have softer than usual mattresses. You can get excellent pumpkin burgers here.

Santiphab Guesthouse (☎ 030-534 6233; bungalows US\$1) Beside the north end of the bridge, Santiphab was one of the first guesthouses on Don Det and is still a good option if view and chilled atmosphere is more important than partying. The restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2.50) is a cooler place for sundowners.

Mr Phao's Sunrise Bungalows (Sunrise Blvd; bungalows US\$1.50) South of the pier, Mr Phao's has a wonderfully warm, family feel to go with tasty food and bungalows with multiple windows and multiple hammocks. Good option.

Sunset Bar & Guesthouse (Sunset Strip; bungalows US\$1.50) There's a fun atmosphere here and it's the bar over the river that drives it. The *lào-lào* mojitos (US\$0.50) are pretty good.

River Garden (☎ 020-527 4785; Southern Shore; bungalows US\$1.50) This three-bungalow place on the southern shore calls itself Don Det's friendliest guesthouse. That's hard to judge, but they were nice enough and it's good value.

Happy Island Nou Phit Guest House (Sunrise Blvd; bungalows US\$2) The standalone bungalows with squat bathrooms aren't bad and the atmosphere is pretty good.

Mr Tho's Bungalows & Restaurant (☎ 030-534 5865; Sunrise Blvd; bungalows US\$2) Just south of the pier, Mr Tho's has long been popular for the relaxed atmosphere, well-constructed bungalows and 'library'. The restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2) is above average, especially the shakes, dhal and *làoap*.

Mr Vong's Guest House Hang Det (☎ 020-526 2591; Southern Shore; bungalows US\$1.50-4) At the south end of Don Det, these bungalows aren't fantastic but Mr Vong speaks good English and is a genuinely nice guy.

Mr Mo Guesthouse (☎ 020-575 9252; Sunrise Blvd; r US\$2-5) Mix of rooms with and without bathroom and nifty curtained off lattice walls, allowing more air and light in, making them brighter and cooler than most.

Noy's Sunset Bungalows & Restaurant (☎ 030-534 6020; bungalows US\$3) In a prime sunset location, Noy's was one of the first guesthouses on Don Det and it's still very popular. Noy's Belgian husband has introduced some very tasty European food to the restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$5), which is worth the extra if you want a taste of home.

Mama Tanon Café Guest House (☎ 020-546 5262; Sunrise Blvd; r US\$3) Formerly known as the Rasta

Café, the spirit of Marley is still strong in this basic but communal place and vivacious Mama (expect to be slapped for any insolence) should appeal.

Mr B's Guest House & Bungalows (☎ 030-534 5109; Sunset Strip; bungalows US\$3-4) English-speaking Mr B has reasonable bungalows in a quiet position, but it's popular more for the warm atmosphere and delicious food in the café (meals US\$1 to US\$2.50); the pumpkin burger (US\$2) has achieved legendary status.

Souksan Hotel (☎ 030-534 5154; r US\$5-15) Squeezed onto the very north tip of Don Det, the Souksan's sturdy rooms are the best on the island but are overpriced and there's not much atmosphere. All have fans that run from about 6pm to 10pm, but you need to pay US\$8 for a bathroom. The restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$3.50) has fine sunset views but it does get hot. The Lao and Chinese food isn't bad.

Almost every place serves cold Beerlao and a range of alternatives. There's also the *fa-lang-run* **Monkey Bar** (☎ 6am-11pm), in the heart of Ban Hua Det, which had the best mix of music when we passed and organises occasional barbecue trips to surrounding islands. It's especially popular late.

Don Khon

All of Don Khon's sleeping and eating options are spread along the river either side of the bridge.

Guesthouse Souksanh (r US\$2, bungalows US\$3) The cheapest place on Don Khon isn't bad, with small rooms overhanging the river, and bungalows with bathroom and fan. There's a family feel and the restaurant and *kátaw* (Lao ball game) court are a bonus.

Somphamit Guest House (r US\$4) Beside the river opposite Mr Bounh's, these six rooms with cold-water bathrooms are a low-budget option on the more gentrified Don Khon strip.

Pan's Guesthouse & Restaurant (☎ 020-563 1434; pkounnavong@yahoo.co.uk; bungalows US\$8; ☑) Pan's new wooden bungalows are spacious and a cut above the bamboo places. They have soft mattresses, fans, clean bathrooms, and there are plans for solar hot water. Over the track the restaurant isn't bad and information is free-flowing. Internet access costs US\$6 per hour.

Auberge Sala Don Khone (☎ 020-563 3718; www.salalao.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$11/21) Romantics take note: this converted French-era hospital contains Don Khon's three most charming

rooms (though only the middle room has a double bed) surrounded by an attractive garden. The remaining sturdy wooden rooms (s/d US\$11/16) with terracotta tile roofs, verandas and attached cold-water bathrooms are also quite nice. Negotiation is possible and from May to September prices drop by US\$3. A generator runs from 6pm to 10pm, longer if you pay for it.

Sala Phae (☎ 030-525 6390; www.salalao.com; r incl breakfast US\$30) If you fancy sleeping on the river, literally, these bamboo rafts (*phae* means raft) floating on the Mekong are for you. Each supports two comfortable if slightly overpriced rooms, with bio-safe toilet in the hot-water bathroom and a small balcony.

Chanthounma's Restaurant (meals US\$1-2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Chanthounma's 'good food to suit your mood' lives up to the advertising, and along with charming Chanthounma, should brighten any mood.

Seng Ahloune Restaurant (☎ 030-534 5807; meals US\$1-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Seng Ahloune is as popular for its delicious comfort food, including great fish and chips (US\$3), as its prime location over the river just south of the bridge. Vietnamese spring rolls and curries are other dishes worth trying on the epic menu. Recommended – except during the tour-group rush hour around noon. It should have four relatively plush rooms (US\$10 including breakfast) open by the time you read this.

Bamboo Bar & Restaurant (meals US\$2-4.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Adjoining the Sala Phae, this is also a floating affair and serves some interesting dishes that have had some good reports.

On the river's edge opposite Auberge Sala Don Khone is a **restaurant** (meals US\$1-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) serving decent food in a tranquil setting. The English-speaking owner is a mine of knowledge about the island.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

It seems hyperinflation has struck the Si Phan Don boatmen. Prices have tripled on the small boats ferrying passengers between Ban Nakasang and Don Det (US\$1.50 per person or US\$2 alone), or Don Khon (US\$2 per person or US\$4 alone). Boats can be hired to go anywhere in the islands for about US\$10 per hour.

For Pakse (US\$3, 2½ to 3½ hours, 148km), buses or *sáwnghtháew* leave Ban Nakasang at

6am, 8am, 9am and 10am. See p260 for buses from Pakse.

Khon Phapheng Falls

ນ້ຳຕົກຕາດຄອນພະເພັງ

South of Don Khong the Mekong River features a 13km stretch of powerful rapids with several sets of cascades. The largest, and by far the most awesome anywhere along the Mekong, is **Khon Phapheng** (admission US\$0.90), near the eastern shore of the Mekong not far from Ban Thakho. Khon Phapheng isn't as beautiful as the towering waterfalls of the Bolaven Plateau or the fairytale pools of Tat Kuang Si near Luang Prabang. But Khon Phapheng is pure, unrestrained aggression as millions of litres of water crash over the rocks and into Cambodia every second. Especially when the Mekong is at full flood this is a spectacular sight, and it's probably the most visited site in Laos for Thai tourists, who arrive by the busload. Part of the attraction is the spiritual significance they hold for both Lao and Thais, who believe Khon Phapheng acts as a spirit trap in the same way as Tat Somphamit (p278).

A wooden pavilion on the Mekong shore affords a good view of the falls. A shaky network of bamboo scaffolds on the rocks next to the falls is used by daring fishermen who are said to have an alliance with the spirits of the cascades.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most people book a trip through a guesthouse to get to the falls, often taking in both the falls and dolphins. If you're making the journey yourself, it's best to get to Ban Nakasang and take a *sāwngthāew* from there. From Ban Nakasang to Khon Phapheng Falls you can hire a motorcycle taxi for about US\$3.50 or a jumbo for US\$10 (this is a return fare for the whole jumbo and should include at least two hours at the falls). Police have stopped boatman running tourists direct from Don Khon to the falls, though it can be arranged if you're prepared to walk a bit at the end.

BOLAVEN PLATEAU

ພູພຽງບໍລະເວນ

Spreading across the northeast of Champasak Province into Salavan and Sekong, the fertile Bolaven Plateau (sometimes spelt Bolovens, known in Lao as Phu Phieng Bolaven) is famous for its cool climate, dra-

matic waterfalls, fertile soil and high-grade coffee plantations. It's also known for being one of the most heavily bombed theatres of the Second Indochina War.

The area wasn't farmed intensively until the French started planting coffee, rubber trees and bananas in the early 20th century. Many of the French planters left following independence in the 1950s and the rest followed as US bombardment became unbearable in the late '60s. Controlling the Bolaven Plateau was considered strategically vital to both the Americans and North Vietnamese, as evidenced by the staggering amount of UXO (unexploded ordnance) still lying around.

The slow process of clearing UXO continues, but in areas where it has been cleared, both local farmers and larger organisations are busy cultivating coffee (see *Kaafēh Láo* p285). Other local products include fruit, cardamom and rattan.

The largest ethnic group on the plateau is the Laven (Bolaven means 'home of the Laven'). Several other Mon-Khmer ethnic groups, including the Alak, Katu, Ta-oy (Tahoy) and Suay, also live on the plateau. Katu and Alak villages are distinctive because they arrange their palm-and-thatch houses in a circle. One unique Katu custom is the carving of wooden caskets for each member of the household well in

THE KATU & ALAK BUFFALO SACRIFICE

The Katu and Alak are well known in Laos for an annual water buffalo sacrifice (usually performed on a full moon in March) in homage to the village spirit. The number of buffaloes sacrificed – typically from one to four animals – depends on their availability and the bounty of the previous year's agricultural harvest. During the ceremony, the men of the village don wooden masks, hoist spears and wooden shields, then dance around the buffaloes in the centre of the circle formed by their houses. After a prescribed period of dancing the men converge on the buffaloes and spear them to death. The meat is divided among the villagers and each household places a piece in a basket on a pole in front of their house as a spirit offering.

CROSSING THE CAMBODIAN BORDER AT DOM KRALOR & VOEN KHAM

This remote border has become a popular crossing point on the Indochina circuit. It also seems to be on a permanent state of change, so keeping up with the details is difficult. When we went to press there were actually two different border points. Laos does not issue visas at this border.

The most popular route south goes via Dom Kralor and the new Chinese-built road to Stung Treng, where Cambodia issues visas on arrival (US\$20). From the islands most travellers are taking a backpacker bus (minibus) at least as far as Stung Treng (US\$13, two hours), and perhaps to Kratie (US\$20, about six hours), Kompong Cham (US\$23, 7½ to 8½ hours), Phnom Penh (US\$26, 11 to 12 hours) or Siem Reap (US\$30, overnight). Going to Stung Treng with this minibus is the easiest, and unless you have days to wait, the cheapest way. Getting to Stung Treng by local transport is possible but could take days and you'll probably end up on the backpacker bus anyway, for want of other options. For travel beyond Stung Treng, it's much cheaper to take Cambodian buses.

The second way of crossing the border is by boat from Voeng Kham. In theory slow boats, long tails and speed boats all run down to Stung Treng from here, but competition from the minibus has in effect put them out of business. If you really want to do this, call Mr T (☎ 855-(0)12-437496) in Stung Treng and he can arrange a boat to meet you at the border; a long tail (2½ hours) should cost about US\$100 per boat. There is a Lao immigration post at Voeng Kham, but the Cambodian post has closed. You'll have to stop at Dom Kralor en route.

Whichever border you take you'll probably have to pay a small 'processing fee' on both sides, usually US\$1 or US\$2 – stock up on US\$1 bills.

The final way of getting to the border is the most interesting. Lane Xang Travel (Xplore Asia; p278) run a raft from Don Det to the border (US\$20), where you and your bags are met by the minivan running through to Stung Treng.

Coming north, tourist minibuses dominate the trade from Stung Treng and the trip is smooth enough. You'll cross the border at Dom Kralor, then probably have to change transport for the last leg to Ban Nakasang. Note again that, for now at least, you'll need to get your Lao visa in advance. Speak with fellow travellers or check the **Thorn Tree** (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>) for the latest.

advance of an expected death; the caskets are stored beneath homes or rice sheds until needed.

Among other tribes, the animistic-shamanistic Suay (who call themselves Kui) are said to be the best elephant handlers. Elephants were used extensively for clearing land and moving timber, though working elephants are hard to find these days.

The Alak, Katu and Laven are distinctive for the face tattoos of their women, a custom slowly dying out as Lao influence in the area increases.

Several **Katu** and **Alak villages** can be visited along the road between Pakse and Paksong at the western edge of the plateau, and along the laterite road that descends steadily from Muang Tha Taeng (That Heng) on the plateau to Beng, in Salavan Province. There are also a few within walking distance of Tat Lo (p286), and on Rte 20. In **Lao Ngam** (not to be confused with Muang Lao Ngam on the road to Salavan), around 40km east of Pakse,

is a large day market frequented by many tribal groups.

The plateau has several spectacular waterfalls, including **Tat Fan**, a few kilometres west of Paksong, and **Tat Lo** on Rte 20 to Salavan.

Tat Fan & Dong Hua Sao NPA

Tat Fan is one of the most spectacular waterfalls in Laos, with parallel streams of the Huay Bang Lieng plunging out of dense forest and down more than 120m. Tat Fan (pronounced *tāt fān*) is at the edge of the 1100-sq-km Dong Hua Sao NPA and the walking trails around here are a good way to get a taste of the park. Dong Hua Sao is home to a population of tigers who are reputed to munch through the occasional unfortunate hunter, though the chances of actually seeing one are virtually nil. You're more likely to see monkeys, gigantic butterflies and, in the wet season, rare hornbills.

Tat Fan is 800m south of Rte 23 – look for the signs at Km 38. A path leads down

to the top of the falls and affords fine views, though this is perilously slippery in the wet season and is often impossible. An easier viewing point is Tad Fane Resort (below), a bungalow and ecotourism operation that looks down onto the falls from the top of a cliff opposite. The resort has a couple of professional English-speaking guides who can arrange fairly easy half- and full-day treks around the edge of the NPA. These might take in Laven and Katu villages, coffee plantations, and almost always at least one other waterfall.

A half-day trek costs US\$3.50 to US\$5, depending on numbers, and a full-day is US\$10 including lunch. When possible, the morning trek leaves at 8.30am and takes the steep descent to the top of Tat Fan, returning about 12.30pm. The 1pm trek is usually more of a stroll and swim, walking through coffee plantations to 17m-high Tat Cham Pi (which means Small Banana Waterfall, though no-one could tell us why). The large pool below is perfect for swimming, and private enough that women can usually get down to their swimwear without offending the locals. Adventure sandals are appropriate in the dry season but boots are better in the wet to deter leeches. As one guide told us, 'the flip-flop is not possible'.

Rafting operations are just beginning to venture into Dong Hua Sao. For details speak to Green Discovery or Lane Xang Travel in Pakse (both p255).

Any transport between Pakse and Paksong, or beyond, stops 800m north of Tat Fan (see opposite for details). When you arrive there's a small fee for entrance and parking if you're not staying/eating at the resort. The popularity of Tat Fan with day-tripping Thai tourists has also prompted local residents to establish a small market in the car park. Some of the goods on sale are innocent enough, such as coffee and green tea grown locally. But please don't buy the orchids, which come straight from Dong Hua Sao. Local guides report that orchids are now only marginally easier to spot than tigers in the area around Tat Fan.

SLEEPING & EATING

Tad Fane Resort (☎ 020-553 1400; www.tadfane.com; s/d/fam incl breakfast US\$30/32/40) These well-built wooden bungalows sit atop a cliff overlooking the falls, though only the two larger family

rooms actually have a clear view. All have a veranda and attached bathroom. The restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$2.50), open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, has great views and serves sandwiches and cheap but tasty Thai food. In the high season (November to February) it pays to book ahead, and to bring something warm.

Paksong & Around

ຕາດຟາ/ປ່າສະຫງວນແຫ່ງຊາດດົງຫົວຊາວ

Laos's coffee capital is nothing to look at, most of it having been obliterated in a storm of bombs during the Second Indochina War. But it makes a cheap Bolaven base from which to explore the plateau, has a mildly interesting market and is refreshingly cool. Plans to develop some basic tourist infrastructure are in their early stages but in the meantime Roger at **Travellers' Meeting Point Café**, on the south side of Rte 23 just as you enter town from Pakse, and the guys at Tad Fane Resort (left) are the best sources of information. Roger might also have a coffee tasting bar open by the time you arrive.

COFFEE

Coffee trees of varying sizes blanket the Bolaven Plateau and you can walk through them on the easy afternoon treks from Tat Fan (p283). Those wanting to get closer to the action can head to **Phuoi** (Phuouy), which has become the unofficial headquarters for Jhai Coffee Farmers Co-op (see *Kha-féh Lao*, opposite). There are plans to open a modest shop selling their Fairtrade coffee by the cup and bag.

To get to Phuoi head east on Rte 23 for about 1.5km and look for the big sign pointing right (south) down a dirt road to Ban Nong Luang. This arse-jarring road runs to the southern edge of the plateau and is home to the 12 mainly Laven villages that make up the Jhai Coffee Farmers Co-op. Phuoi is 4km along, but more adventurous souls with a few hours spare might want to continue another 7km to **Ban Nong Luang**. From this village it's possible to take a local guide and walk to two fairly impressive waterfalls, the seven-tiered **Tat Tha Jet** and **Tat Kameud**. The return trip takes a while so start early. If you get stuck home-stays (p48) in Ban Nong Luang are possible. Note that no-one in the village speaks English, but they should understand 'homestay' if you want one.

KHA-FÉH LÁO (LAO COFFEE)

The high, flat ground of the Bolaven Plateau is ideal for growing coffee and the region produces some of the best and most expensive bean on earth. Arabica, Arabica Typica and Robusta are grown, much of it around the 'coffee town' of Paksong.

The French introduced coffee to the Bolaven Plateau in the early 1900s and the Arabica Typica shipped home became known as the 'champagne of coffee'. Plans to make the plateau a major coffee-growing centre died with the bombardment of the 1960s and '70s.

Business began to pick up in the 1990s and was dominated by a few plantations and companies, the largest being Pakse-based Dao Heung. For the farmers, however, earning less than US\$0.50 per kg wasn't really improving their living standards. These businesses still dominate today but a fair-trade project aimed at empowering small-scale farmers is gathering steam. The **Jhai Coffee Farmer Cooperative** (www.jhaicoffee.com) is a 500-member group, which was formed in 2004 with help from the California-based Jhai Foundation and Thanksgiving Coffee in the US. Members come from 12 villages and several ethnic groups living mainly along the rough road running south from Rte 23 to Ban Nong Luang (see opposite). Machinery has been bought, and cooperative farmers have been trained in modern cultivation methods to maximise the quality of the beans. And with Fairtrade certification the farmers are guaranteed 19,000 kip per kg, more than three times what they made selling to larger wholesalers.

For now Jhai Coffee is only available in the US or online, but there are plans for a cupping lab in Paksong and for bagged bean to be sold in Phuoi, Pakse, Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

WATERFALLS

As well as Tat Fan, numerous breathtaking other cascades drop off the Bolaven Plateau within striking distance of Paksong. Most are marked by a blue sign with a painted representation of the cataract in question. **Tat Yuang** (admission US\$0.50, motorbike parking US\$0.30) is among the most impressive, with its twin torrents falling about 40m and flowing into lush jungle. Tat Yuang is hugely popular with day-trippers from Pakse and Thailand who like to picnic at the top, so getting there early is a good idea. It's OK to swim at the bottom – women must wear a sarong.

To get there, follow the signs right (south) off Rte 23 at Km 40 and go a further 2km along a soon-to-be-upgraded laterite road. A scenic way to Tat Fan from here is the 45-minute walk along a beautiful forest trail that starts beside the toilets at Tat Yuang.

Beyond Paksong you'll see a sign pointing north to **Tat Meelook**. Apparently these twin falls were once a popular local attraction, but we can tell you from experience that it must have been a while ago. The 3.7km trip was challenging, to put it mildly, and when we eventually arrived the falls weren't really worth it.

SLEEPING & EATING

Paksong Guest House (☎ 020-982 2006; r US\$2-12) This guesthouse has rooms in three build-

ings, including grubby twins with shared bathroom (US\$2) and better twins with bathroom (US\$7); you need to pay US\$9 to get hot water. Coming from Pakse, turn left after the Kaysone Monument and take the left just before the bridge (about 1.5km from Rte 23); the guesthouse is on the right opposite some noodle stalls.

Borlaven Guesthouse (☎ 030-575 8086; Rte 23; r US\$5) About 2km east of town this attractive-looking wooden place is run by a young family whose pet is a young gibbon. The guesthouse is a bit out of the way, but the rooms are better value than the Paksong. If you ask ahead of time, they can supply dinner.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses and *sǎwngthǎew* between Paksong and Pakse's southern (Km 8) bus terminal leave frequently between about 8am and 4pm (US\$1.50, 90 minutes). For Tat Fan, get off at Km 38 and follow the signs to the falls and resort (about 800m south of the turn-off).

Utayan Bajiang Champasak (Phasoume Resort)

A Thai-owned 'eco-resort', **Utayan Bajiang Champasak** (☎ 031-251294; 020-576 7678; off Rte 20) 38km northwest of Pakse is scattered through a stretch of thick jungle either side

of a small but beautiful waterfall. It's possible to stay here in one of the 14 Swiss Family Robinson-style tree houses (US\$28), but they're overpriced and it's better to just stop in the restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$4) for a tasty Thai lunch – most likely with busloads of Thai tourists.

The resort itself might seem to be more a homage to big dead trees – sliced and diced into chairs, tables, beams, posts, floor timbers, stepping stones and just about any other use you can imagine – than to live trees. But we're assured that the tonnes of timber used to build this place were taken from trees rejected by local logging operations.

An appealing elevated jungle walk leads to a 'museum village' where families of Katu, Nge and Laven attempt to entertain visitors. The families seem happy enough, and you can even stay with them for US\$8 per person, but for us the whole thing was way too contrived – their museum life just felt weird.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There is no direct public transport to Phasoume. Take any transport heading up Rte 20 towards Salavan and get off at a turn-off 400m after the Houy Cham Pa bridge, about 36km from Pakse. There's a sign in Thai, but not English. It's then about a 1.5km walk.

SALAVAN PROVINCE

Like Sekong and Attapeu Provinces to the south, Salavan is notable as much for its remoteness as any traditional tourism draws. Salavan (also spelt Saravan and Saravane) is not on the way to anywhere and roads remain some of the worst in Laos, but it is these very qualities and the lure of tough travel that have begun to attract a few hardy visitors looking to get well-and-truly off the beaten track.

There are, of course, a few attractions. The province straddles the northern edge of the Bolaven Plateau and Tat Lo, just 30km from Salavan town, is an attractive little town near some waterfalls and is the best place to base yourself. Beyond waterfalls, however, the ethnic diversity of the region is its main attraction. While more than half of the population of Salavan is ethnically

Lao (Loum and Soung), none are native to this area. The remainder of the 324,000 inhabitants belong to relatively obscure Mon-Khmer groups, including the Ta-oy (Tahoy), Lavai, Katang, Alak, Laven, Ngai, Tong, Pako, Kanay, Katu and Kado.

Actually getting into these villages, however, requires something approaching a full-scale expedition – or a fair bit of self-confidence, at least. If this appeals to you, then you could head for Tahoy (Ta-oy people, see p289) or Toumlan (Katang, see p289) for a taste of minority life.

Almost half the province is covered by natural forest but getting into the three protected areas is just as tough. **Phu Xieng Thong NPA** is accessible from Pakse (see p261), but for now the **Se Ban Nuan NPA** near to Rte 13 and particularly the **Se Xap NPA** in the far east have no tourist infrastructure whatsoever – in fact, infrastructure of any kind is extremely limited.

Just about every major branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail cut through Salavan at some point and UXO remains a serious problem. While Salavan town no longer has piles of rusting war detritus waiting for scrap merchants, plenty of towns to the north and east do. Clearance teams head out almost every day to continue the painstaking task of finding and neutralising these weapons of war, and expect to be busy for years. Despite plenty of interest from travellers keen to walk part of the trail, so far no such operation exists.

TAT LO

ຕາດເລາະ
☎ 034

Tat Lo (pronounced *tàat lāw*) is a sort of backpacker retreat with cheap accommodation, an attractive setting and things to do, but not many backpackers. Which is much of its charm. Waterfalls are the town's *raison d'être* and they give it a serenity that sees many visitors stay longer than they planned. If you're on The Southern Swing (p263) or planning to explore deeper into the province, this is the ideal base.

The town is a one-street affair, with most accommodation just east of the bridge. A **community guides office** here has information on nine different treks to surrounding sights and nearby Ngai villages (starting at US\$4 per person for a four-hour trip) and is where you get hooked up with a guide. It's run by Soulideth of Tim Guesthouse (opposite), who speaks perfect English and is a mine of information

on nearby attractions. He also offers **internet access** (per hour US\$6) if you're desperate, and can arrange motorbike hire (US\$10 per day).

WATERFALLS

There are actually three waterfalls on this stretch of river. The nearest to town is **Tat Hang**, which can be seen from the bridge and some guesthouses. It's possible to swim here – just go where the local kids do. Note that during the dry season, dam authorities upstream release water in the evening, more than doubling the waterfall volume. Check out what time the release occurs so you're not standing at the top of the waterfall then – a potentially fatal error.

Tat Lo, about 700m upriver, is a little bigger but probably won't knock your socks off. To get there, cross the bridge and walk up through Saise Guest House (below), keeping to the path by the river. The spectacular third cascade is **Tat Suong**. It's about 10km from town and you could walk there, but it's better to go by motorbike or bicycle. Head uphill past the turn-off to Tadlo Lodge (below), turn right at the power station and left where the road ends. Look (hard) for the sign pointing left to Ban Sanumny and follow it to a parking area. It's not far from here to the stunning and precipitous edge of the falls...don't get too close.

ELEPHANT RIDES

Tadlo Lodge (below) offers rides on its two female elephants (US\$5 per elephant, 90 minutes). The typical ride plods through forest, villages and streams full of slippery rocks you wouldn't dream of crossing on foot. Each elephant can carry two people and they depart from just outside the guides' office at 8am, 10am, 1pm and 3pm. You can book at the guides' office, Tim Guesthouse or Tadlo Lodge itself.

SLEEPING & EATING

Siphaseth Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 211890; r US\$2-6) With newish rooms with fan and hot/cold bathroom, and more traditional bamboo rooms with share bathroom, this guesthouse is the pick. The restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$3) is the ideal place to have a sunset drink, though the food is hit and miss. It's on the river immediately downstream of the bridge.

Saylomyen Guest House (r US\$2.50) Next door to Siphaseth, the Saylomyen has simple fan-

conditioned huts with balcony and an equally simple shared bathroom.

Tim Guesthouse & Restaurant (☎ 211885; 020-564 8820; soulidet@gmail.com; r US\$4-6; ☑) The cane-and-wood bungalows here have shared bathroom and no views, but what they lack in luxuries is made up for in atmosphere. English- and French-speaking Soulideth has all the local information and the restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$3), open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, serves the usual range of travellers' favourites plus seasonal specialities (ask about these), all accompanied by soft jazz. There is a book exchange, and attached to the guesthouse is a classroom (built by Soulideth) where local kids learn computer skills.

Saise Guest House (☎ /fax 211886; 020-564 2489; r US\$6-60) In lush gardens on the west bank of the river, this place sprawls from Tat Hang to Tat Suong. Rooms range from cheap ('tribe bungalows' for US\$6 to US\$8) to overpriced (rooms in the 'blue house', about 700m upriver at Tat Lo itself). Those in between (in the 'green house'), are better value. Big, comfortable and tastefully decorated Room A2 is our pick (US\$30). Others are about US\$20 and most include an American breakfast.

Tadlo Lodge (☎ /fax 211889; souriyavincet@yahoo.com; bungalows s/d incl breakfast US\$20/30) In prime positions on both sides of the river overlooking the lower waterfall, these well-built bungalows have balconies and clean hot-water bathrooms; discounts are possible. The open-sided restaurant (meals US\$3 to US\$5), open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, serves reliably good Lao, Thai and European dishes. The only downside is that until a more permanent bridge is built, it's a long, dark walk from bungalow to restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Just say 'Tat Lo' at Pakse's southern bus station and you'll be pointed in the right direction (see p260). Tat Lo is 86km northeast of Pakse off the road to Salavan; you'll be dropped at Ban Khoua Set. There might be a *dok dok* (US\$0.20), tuk-tuk or motorbike (US\$0.30 to US\$50) to shuttle you the last 1.8km; if not it's a pleasant, if all uphill, walk.

If you're heading to Paksong, get yourself up to Ban Beng, and catch a bus coming from Salavan. It might go all the way to Paksong, or you might need to change buses at Tha Taeng; either way, give yourself a few hours.

SALAVAN

ສາລະວັນ

☎ 034 / pop 76,493

Before it was renamed Salavan (Sarawan in Thai) by the Siamese in 1828, this area was a Champasak kingdom outpost known as Muang Mam and inhabited mostly by Mon-Khmer minorities. The provincial capital of Salavan was all but destroyed in the Indochina War, when it bounced back and forth between Royal Lao Army and Pathet Lao occupation. The rebuilt town is a collection of brick and wood buildings, though if you look carefully you'll find more old buildings around than you might expect and it's not totally without charm.

The town sits within a bend of the Se Don, which ultimately meets the Mekong at Pakse. Functionally, Salavan serves mainly as a supply centre for farmers in surrounding districts. And while it's the best place from which to explore the province, with its bus station serving anywhere in the province it's possible to go, for many travellers the tranquil rural atmosphere isn't enough of a draw and instead they stay at Tat Lo (see p286). If you do stay note that despite nearby hydroelectric power stations, power outages are not uncommon and when the power is out the water stops too.

Information

The **Lao Development Bank** (☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), a little west of the market, will change US dollars or Thai baht cash; if it's closed, try the market. The **post office** (☎ 8am-4.30pm) is around

the corner from the market, and next door is a **telecom office** (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) but apparently they don't do international calls.

Two unmissably large Municipal Authority buildings dominate the town, the older of which is home to the **Provincial Tourism Office** (☎ 211528; Ground fl; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri), where the French- and English-speaking Mr Bounthone Sinachak is well worth chatting with if you plan on heading further into the province. If you ask nicely he might give you a handy booklet with pictures of what you might see. The **Provincial Hospital** is one block north, and is OK for minor emergencies.

At the time of writing there was no internet in Salavan.

Sleeping & Eating

Most of the lodgings in Salavan have a mix of fan and air-con rooms with and without private bathrooms. There are several noodle shops around the market and at the bus station.

Silsamay Guesthouse (☎ 020-554805; Rte 20; rUS\$4-7; ☎) On Rte 20 just west of the bus station, the spacious rooms are nice enough with fan or air-con, TV and hot water.

Saise Guest House (☎ 211054; rUS\$4-8; ☎) On a rambling plot about 800m east of the market, the Saise has plenty of character but seems to be in a steady cycle of decline. Certain rooms in the newer 'Hotel' building are huge and fair value at US\$8 with air-con. The older wooden building has airy but dusty fan rooms (US\$4) with two or three beds.

Chindavone Guest House (☎ 211065; r US\$8; ☎)

Near the market right in the centre of town, the bungalows here have large rooms with hot-water bathrooms, TV, and both fan and air-con. For rooms and location, if not price, this is probably the pick.

In the same street as the Chindavone is the **Thippaphone Guest House** (☎ 211063; r US\$3-7; ☎), with a wide variety of rooms, some with satellite TV, and a wonderfully welcoming manager, though she doesn't speak any English; and the **Miss Asim Guesthouse** (☎ 211062; r US\$4; ☎), where rooms aren't great; try the others first.

The pick of Salavan's limited number of eating establishments is **Denuxa** (meals US\$1-4; ☎ dinner), which serves tasty Lao and sukuyaki dishes and a lot of local information from the English and German-speaking host.

Down a short dirt road at the south end of town, **Hong Lek** (meals US\$1-3; ☎ dinner), a fish restaurant on the banks of the Se Don, serves superb barbecued fish, fresh vegetables and icy Beerlao, just don't forget your mosquito repellent and phrasebook.

Getting There & Away

BUS & SĀWNGTHĀEW

For buses from Pakse see p259. Salavan's bus terminal is 2km west of the town centre where Rte 20 meets the rough Rte 15. Buses for Pakse (US\$2, three hours, 124km) are scheduled to leave five times between 7.30am and 1.30pm. Buses or *sāwngthāew* leave for Sekong (US\$1.80, three hours, 93km) at 7.45am and 1.30pm. These go through Tha Taeng (US\$1, one to 1½ hours, 49km), which has dedicated services at 10am and 11am.

Lot dai sǎan, trucks with wooden cabins built on the back and seats sans legroom crammed inside, are the only beasts capable of tackling the roads north, east and directly west of Salavan. They run along rough Rte 15 to Khong Sedon (US\$2.50, 2½ to 3½ hours, 75km), on Rte 13, where you can pick up other transport to Savannakhet.

In the dry season they also take on the potholed stretches of earth that masquerade as roads running to Tahoy (right) and Toumlan (right).

AROUND SALAVAN

Upcountry Salavan Province is an adventurer's delight, partly because getting to anywhere worth seeing is an adventure in itself.

Nong Bua

ໜອງບູວາ

The lake of **Nong Bua**, near the source of the Se Don about 15km east of town along a seasonal road, is famous for its dwindling population of Siamese crocodiles (*khāe* in Lao). There aren't many left (two or three, apparently), but tourism officials are establishing a day trip to Nong Bua by bicycle, motorbike or foot. A guide and bicycle cost US\$5 per day each; there are no motorbikes for rent. Chances of actually seeing the crocs are slim. Instead, look at 1588m-high Phu Katae nearby – there are plans for a trek to the old CIA landing strip on top.

Toumlan & Rte 23

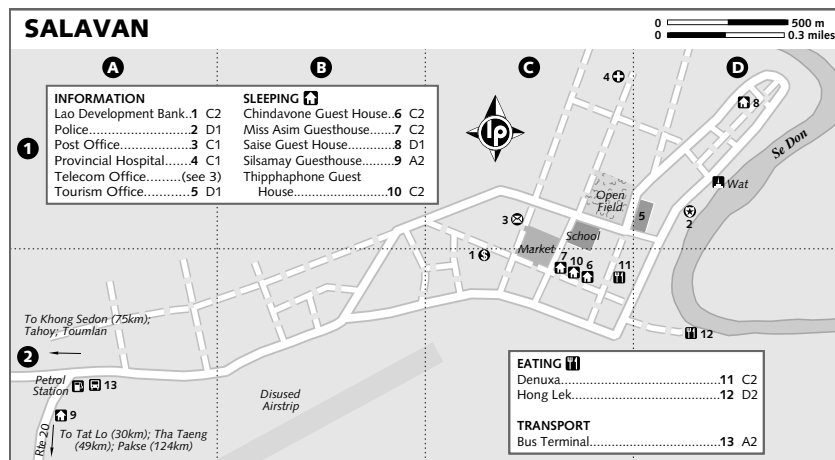
About 50km north of Salavan along bumpy Rte 23 is the Katang village of **Toumlan**. The area is famous for its silk weavings and Lapup festival (see The Katu & Alak Buffalo Sacrifice p282) usually held in late February. The town is very poor but interesting from a cultural point of view and because of its position on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which continues to pose a threat through UXO while also providing income from the sale of scrap. There is an ultra-basic government guesthouse in town.

North of Toumlan Rte 23 heads towards Rte 9 and Muang Phin, via the site of **Princes' Bridge**, named because it was built by the 'Red Prince' Souphanouvong (who was a trained engineer) in 1942. Unfortunately the bridge was blown up in 1968 and has never been rebuilt. Locals tell us that in the dry season it should be possible to cross here with a small motorbike and continue on to Muang Phin on Rte 9, the journey between Salavan and Muang Phin taking about six to eight hours.

Tahoy & the Ho Chi Minh Trail

ເສັ້ນທາງໄຮຈິມິນ

Northeast along Rte 15, which can be impassable for days during the wet season, is **Tahoy** (Ta-oy), a centre for the Ta-oy ethnic group, who number around 30,000 spread across the eastern areas of Salavan and Sekong Provinces. The Ta-oy live in forested mountain valleys at altitudes between 300m and 1000m, often in areas shared with Katu and other Mon-Khmer groups. Like many Mon-Khmer groups in Southern Laos, they practise a combination of animism and shamanism; during village ceremonies, the Ta-oy put up diamond-patterned bamboo totems to warn outsiders not to enter.



Tahoy town was an important marker on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and two major branches lead off Rte 15 nearby. If you want to see war junk ask a local to take you; you might need to draw pictures of bombs or tanks to get your message across. If you come to Tahoy you'll likely have to stay. The government lets out **rooms** (US\$3) in a simple building. Tahoy is tiger country and while the locals won't leave town after dark for fear of them, you'll be very lucky indeed to actually hear one.

A *sáwngtháew* leaves Salavan for Tahoy (US\$1.50, four to eight hours, 84km) at 2pm every second day in the dry season. Alternatively, ask Mr Bounthone Sinachak at the Provincial Tourism Office (p288) about hiring a 4WD pick-up. If you're really into adventure, follow the story of one Dutch couple who took their 4WD up an obscure branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail beyond Tahoy in March 2006. They eventually made it to Ban Dong on Rte 9, but it took them three days and they don't really recommend it – read their account at www.landcruising.nl. All this is due to change, though, as a sealed road to the border via Tahoy is due to be completed by 2010.

SEKONG PROVINCE

Stretching from near the eastern edge of the Bolaven Plateau to the Vietnam border, this rugged and remote province is dotted with waterfalls, dissected by the impressive Se Kong and dominated in the east by the lesser-known Dakcheung Plateau, which rises 1500m above sea level. With the massive cliff walls of the southern Se Xap NPA (some are said to be more than 1000m high) and several sizable mountains in the province, Sekong could be an outdoor adventurers' paradise.

Alas, not yet. The province is among the poorest in Laos and a combination of terrible road infrastructure, virtually no facilities for tourism and a landscape that remains unsafe due to UXO dropped on the Ho Chi Minh Trail (p251) decades ago, mean much of it is off-limits to all but the most intrepid.

That's not to say there's no reason to come. There are waterfalls on the Se Nam Noy (Nam Noy River) and the breathtaking Nam Tok Katamtok waterfall (p292), which

drop more than 100m. The other reason to come is the people. By population Sekong is the smallest of Laos's provinces, but among its 85,000 inhabitants are people from 14 different tribal groups, making it the most ethnically diverse province in the country. The vast majority are from Mon-Khmer tribes, with the Alak, Katu, Taliang, Yae and Nge the largest groups. These total more than 75% of the population. Other groups include the Pacoh, Chatong, Suay (Souei), Katang and Ta-oy (Tahoy). These diverse groups are not Buddhists, so you won't see too many wats. Rather, their belief systems mix animism and ancestor worship. The Katu and Taliang tend towards monogamy but, unusually in a part of the world so traditionally male dominated, tolerate polyandry (two or more husbands).

Note that in the wet season travelling anywhere off Rte 16 can be difficult.

SEKONG (MUANG LAMAM)

ຂອງ(ເມືອງລາມາ)

☎ 038 / pop 24,000

Sekong is a good base from which to visit the surrounding waterfalls or embark on a river trip down the Se Kong to Attapeu. It's not, however, very exciting. Carved out of the wilderness in the mid-1980s, the unnecessarily sprawling town is set on a basic grid with government buildings in the centre surrounded by areas of concrete, wooden and wood-and-thatch stilt homes. There are no street names.

The Se Kong wraps around the town on the southern and eastern sides, while the Bolaven Plateau rises precipitously to the west. At the **town market**, tribes from outlying areas trade cloth for Vietnamese goods while others sell an ever-dwindling number of birds, lizards and small mammals hunted in nearby forest.

It's worth visiting **UXO Lao** (☎ 8am-5pm) opposite the Ministry of Finance office, just west of the market. These guys have been clearing UXO for years and have a mildly interesting display of rusting munitions and weaponry in their yard. Visitors are welcome.

Information & Orientation

Sekong sits on a grid between Rte 16 in the north and the Se Kong to the south. Almost everything you need is in the streets just east of the market. The only real information offered here is in the Pha Thip Restaurant

menu, which has stacks of information on local ethnic groups, villages and handicrafts, most of it prepared by a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) caseworker in the late 1990s.

The **Lao Development Bank** (☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) is on the road behind Souksamlane Sekong Hotel, nearer to the market; it changes Thai baht and US dollars cash for kip only. The **post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) is at the other end of this road; the **Lao Telecommunications** (☎ 8am-noon, 1-5pm & 6-8pm Mon-Fri) building is next door. There was no internet when we visited.

Sleeping & Eating

Sekong isn't blessed with wonderful lodgings. Several modest restaurants and *fôe* shops can be found near the market.

Woman Fever Kosmet Centre Guesthouse (☎ 211046; r US\$3) Next to the Sekong Souksamlane, the simple rooms with share bathrooms here are cheap but fine and we haven't heard of any guests catching woman fever (your money actually goes to a malaria education group). Good ultra-budget option.

Phong Paseuth Guesthouse (☎ 211085; Rte 16; r US\$4.50-7; 🍷) On the left as you enter town from Paksong, these simple, compact rooms with cold-water bathrooms were new and subsequently quite clean when we visited.

Sekong Souksamlane Hotel (☎ 211039; r US\$5-6.50; 🍷) The fan rooms on the ground floor and air-con rooms upstairs have hot water and are decent enough, but you'll probably need to wake someone up to get anything. The restaurant opens irregularly. There is a handicrafts shop outside (see Shopping right).

Vangxang Savanh Sekong Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 211297; r US\$6-7.50; 🍷) This place sits on the banks of the Se Kong at the west end of town (look for the sign from Rte 16). The rooms aren't bad, but with cold-water bathrooms aren't as good as they look. It has a popular (and sometimes noisy) restaurant. A reasonable choice.

Koki Guesthouse (☎ 211401; r US\$7; 🍷) Last time we visited this place it was home to a UN worker and her family. Now it's a small guesthouse with friendly staff who don't speak any English. Rooms are small but clean and have TV and hot water. To find it, go past the bank from the direction of the market and take the first right (north).

Pha Thip Restaurant (☎ 211343; meals US\$1.50-2.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the Sekong Souksamlane Hotel, this simple place is the best choice for food. It has a variety of tasty Vietnamese, Lao and Western dishes (try the deep-fried fish with vegetables), heavenly fruit shakes and a hugely informative menu. Lovely Vietnamese owner Nang Tu speaks some English and is hoping to offer rooms (for about US\$4) soon. Recommended.

The **Somview Restaurant**, just down a lane beside the Pha Thip Restaurant, is a good place for a sunset drink.

Shopping

The cheapest place to buy tribal textiles is the market (where a sarong-sized textile of recent manufacture should cost about US\$10), but the selection is not as good as in the following shops.

Sekong Ethnic Store (☎ 8am-6pm) A ramshackle bamboo-thatch place on the street behind the Souksamlane Sekong Hotel and opposite the street with the Koki Guesthouse, this store has a good range of textiles woven by the Alak, Katu, Nge and Talieng tribes, plus a few baskets and other tribal products. It's a good place to sort out the different colours and patterns of the various tribes. Mention the tribe and the owners will show you, for example, Katu cloth and its typically broad bands of red and black with small white beads sewn into the fabric, or Alak designs with their more refined stripe. Rare Alak or Nge loincloths – long, narrow, heavy beaded affairs – can occasionally be found on sale for as much as US\$200. To find the shop, look for the blue and white painted sign announcing 'Welcome to Visit Laos Year 1999-2000'.

Lao Handicrafts Shop (☎ 211039; Sekong Souksamlane Hotel; ☎ 8am-4pm) Among the piles of textiles here you might find rare (though not necessarily expensive) examples of sarongs or blankets with stylised helicopter and fighter-jet motifs alongside traditional renditions of scorpions and lizards. If it's closed, as is likely, ask someone at reception to let you in.

Getting There & Away

Sekong's dusty/muddy bus station is about 2km northwest of town off Rte 16; a jumbo there costs about US\$0.50. Few buses actually originate in Sekong, rather stopping here between Pakse and Attapeu, and schedules are flexible. For Pakse (US\$2.50, 3½ to 4½ hours,

DOWN THE SE KONG BY LONGTAIL BOAT

With Rte 16 improved, boats down the Se Kong to Attapeu are hard to find these days. However, you should be able to find a boatman willing to take you if you ask around at the pier beside the Vangxang Savanh Sekong Hotel early in the morning – or perhaps speak to the Pha Thip Restaurant the night before. Expect to pay about US\$60 for the four- to seven-hour trip, depending on the river level.

The trip is incredibly scenic as the river parallels the eastern escarpment of the Bolaven Plateau most of the way. During the late dry season, you may have to get out and walk along a path next to the river while the boatman manoeuvres the craft through shallow rapids. The Se Kong is quite swift during the rainy season – if you're not a good swimmer, this journey may not be for you.

Remember that the cheapest boatman will not necessarily be the best – it's worth looking for someone with experience. Also, if a life jacket is provided be prepared to wear it; the last time a *falang* drowned on this trip (in very unlucky circumstances) the boatman got 10 years.

135km) there is at least one bus (usually 6am) then occasional buses/*sáwngtháew* coming through from Attapeu until about 1pm. For Attapeu (US\$1.50, two hours, 76km) there is one dedicated departure at 8am, then every two hours or so until about 4pm. Transport to Salavan (US\$1.80, 2½ to 3½ hours, 93km) leaves intermittently from 5am 'til noon.

For transport from Pakse see p260.

Getting Around

Sekong has a couple of jumbos, look for them at the market. Pha Thip Restaurant can rent motorbikes for US\$10 per day.

AROUND SEKONG

Off Rte 16 south of Sekong there are several villages and waterfalls that could be visited as part of a day trip; you'd have to hire a bicycle or motorbike in Sekong, or charter a tuk-tuk or jumbo (about US\$8 for six hours). About 3.5km south of town, turn right along a rough dirt road immediately after a school. Follow the dirt road about 2.5km to the relatively ordinary **Tat Hia** (Tat Hien) waterfall. A little further along Rte 16, another path heads southeast for about 3km toward the Se Kong and two Alak villages. The first is known for its fine *sín* (traditional sarongs). Similar villages can be found at the end of dirt roads leading east 12km and 14km from Sekong.

The road at Km 14 also leads to **Tat Faek**. On the Se Nam Noi not far upriver of the Se Kong, Tat Faek is about 5m high and there are two pools in which you can swim. Swimmers should use the one above the falls, as a diabolical-sounding puffer fish known as the

pa pao is believed to lurk in the pool below. Locals report with a sort of gleeful dread how the evil *pa pao* can home in on and sink its razor-sharp teeth into the human penis with uncanny precision. (Admittedly, the women are more gleeful about this than the men.) Tat Faek is about 1.5km off the road; take the right fork after about 500m, then turn left another 800m on.

At Km 16 a long bridge crosses the Se Nam Noi and you enter Attapeu Province. Just south of the bridge a track leads east to **Tat Se Noi**, known locally as 'waterfall of the heads' (Tat Hua Khon) owing to a WWII incident in which Japanese soldiers decapitated a number of Lao soldiers and tossed their heads into the falls. The falls are about 100m wide and 7m deep.

Nam Tok Katamtok

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All of the above falls are small fry compared with the mighty Nam Tok Katamtok. Running off the Bolaven Plateau, the Huay Katam drops more than 100m out of thick forest at what some describe as Laos's highest waterfall. And while they may or may not be bigger than Tat Fan, these falls are more impressive because you need to be something of an explorer to find them.

Turn west along the laterite road 31km south of Sekong that eventually leads to Paksong, 71km away. There are actually two falls to be seen from this road. The first is after 16km, where if you look off to the north (right) you'll see a large cascade in the distance. Nam Tok Katamtok is about 2km further on. You'll know you're getting near

when you cross three bridges and climb a hill, where a 25m-long trail leads back off to the left and out of the jungle appears this spectacular drop. There is no sign and both are easy to miss, so check your odometer and slow down when you get near.

ATTAPEU PROVINCE

Attapeu is the wild east of Laos. It's frontier territory in every sense, with the rugged and densely forested regions bordering Cambodia and Vietnam as well-endowed with wildlife as anywhere in the country. Tigers aren't uncommon and species as rare as the clouded leopard have been seen in the more remote areas.

The province has hosted an important trading route since the Chenla period and Khmer-style brick *prasat* have been found in the jungles near the Vietnam border. During the Lan Xang period the area was known for being rich in gold and forest products. And in the 16th century, it saw the demise of King Saysethathirat. Historians believe the Lan Xang regent upset the locals and members of his court in Vientiane when, on an expedition to the area, he kidnapped a local woman and hauled her off to Vientiane. After getting her pregnant he returned to Attapeu to settle things down but wound up dead instead. The town of Saisetha is named after him and he is believed to be buried under a nearby stupa (p296).

More recent history is just as violent. Every branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran through Attapeu and the province was heavily bombed during the Second Indochina War. Rare pieces of ordnance are still visible, though most has been carted off for scrap – the missile launcher at Pa-am (p296) being the notable exception.

A new trail, the smooth-sealed Rte 18B to the Vietnam border, has brought Vietnamese back in numbers. In several new guesthouses and restaurants in the pretty provincial capital you'll need to speak Vietnamese to be understood.

Of the 11 ethnic groups found in Attapeu, Lave, Nge and Talieng predominate, with Lao Loum, Chinese and a fast-growing number of Vietnamese concentrated in the capital. There are less than 20 Buddhist temples in the entire province.

ATTAPEU (SAMAKHI XAI)

ຮັດຕະວັງ

☎ 036 / pop 19,200

Officially known as Muang Samakhi Xai but seldom referred to as such, the capital of Attapeu Province is set in a large valley and flanked by the mountains of the nearby Bolaven Plateau, 1000m above, and the two rivers that meet nearby – the mighty Se Kong and the smaller Se Kaman. Attapeu is famed in Southern Laos as the 'garden village' for its shady lanes and lush flora. While thoroughly deserved, this reputation is all the more remarkable given that Attapeu actually means 'buffalo shit' in Lao. Legend has it that when early Lao Loum people arrived they asked the locals what was the name of their town. In response, the villagers apparently pointed at a nearby pile of buffalo manure, known locally as *itkapu*. There was (hopefully) some misunderstanding, or perhaps the Lao Loum or even the villagers actually didn't like the place. Either way, with some subsequent adjustment in pronunciation, the town became Attapeu.

While Attapeu has little in the way of 'sights' it's not a shitty town. The engaging locals, cheap accommodation and riverside 'sunset' drinking spots make this a good base for exploring the wild east, a job made simpler by the recent completion of a bridge across the Se Kong and Rte 18B (the only street in town that actually has a name) to Vietnam.

Information

Attapeu Office of Tourism (☎ 211056; Provincial Office) On the northwest edge of town this office has guides (usually a staff member), though you'll find better value (less than US\$20 per day) asking around town. They do have some brochures and a large-scale map.

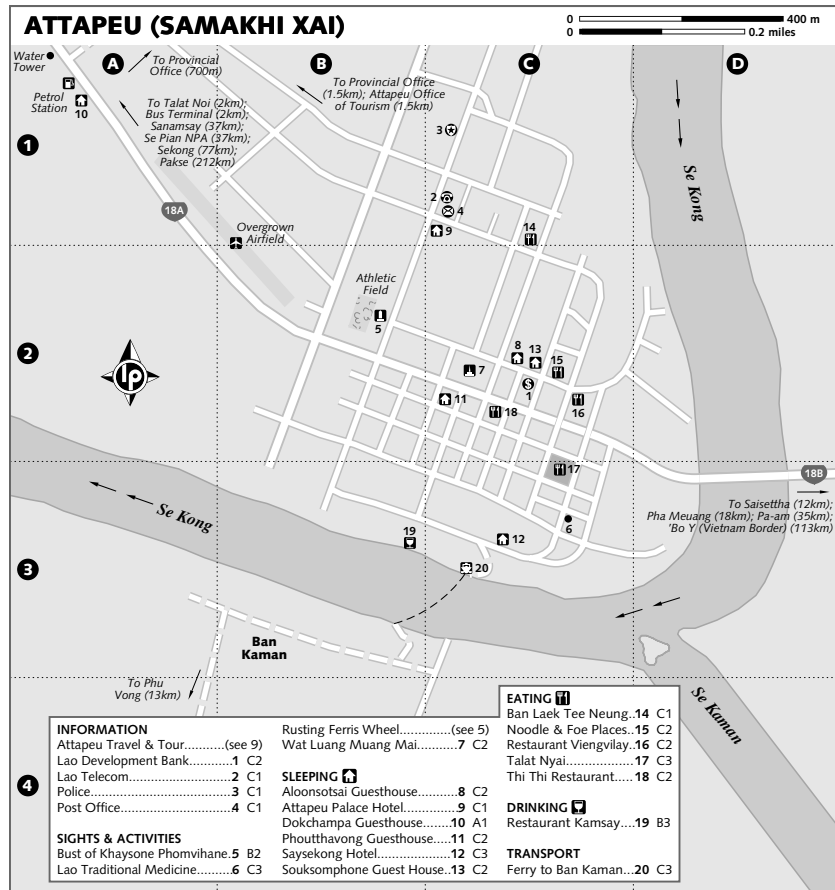
Attapeu Travel & Tour (☎ 211204; www.offroad.laopdr.com; Attapeu Palace Hotel) The only English-speaking guide in town is Mr Yae (☎ 020-581 2112), who can arrange and lead any treks, including expeditions to Nong Fa. He also rents 4WD vehicles for US\$50 per day, plus petrol.

Internet (Attapeu Palace Hotel; per hr US\$6; ☎ 7am-10pm) Only one terminal, in reception. Lao Telecom say optic fibre is coming in 2008...

Lao Development Bank (☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) About 500m southeast of the airstrip. Changes US dollars or Thai baht for kip at poor rates.

Lao Telecom (☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Fri)

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



Sights & Activities

Despite being a largely Lao Loum place, Attapeu town is not renowned for its Buddhist temples. The most interesting is **Wat Luang Muang Mai**, usually known as Wat Luang, which was built in 1939 and features some older monastic buildings with original *naga* bargeboards.

A couple of hundred metres west is an open field with an overgrown **bust of Kaysone Phomvihane** and a diminutive, rusting **Ferris wheel**. The latter will appeal to photographers on weekends, when children can often be seen scrambling all over it.

After a motorbike adventure (motorbikes can be hired from Souksomphone Guest House) sweat out the dust at **Lao Traditional**

Medicine (☎ 3-7pm Tue & Thu-Sun), which is actually a sauna place. Look for the 'Sauna Open' sign.

Sleeping

You'll probably find several new places have opened to cater to the growing number of Vietnamese traders coming this way.

Souksomphone Guest House (☎ 211046; r US\$3-7.50; ☎) A block north of Rte 18A, the Souksomphone is the place with the mother-of-all hardwood staircases protruding from the front. The cramped rooms (which come in several varieties) are disappointing by comparison. The manager speaks some English and can arrange motorbike hire (US\$10).

Aloonotsai Guesthouse (☎ 211250; r US\$3-9; ☎) Just west of the Souksomphone, this two-storey aquamarine-coloured place has clean rooms to fit a range of budgets. If you can live without air-con and Vietnamese TV the US\$4 rooms upstairs are the best value.

Dokchampa Guesthouse (☎ 211061; Rte 18A; r US\$5.50-7.50; ☎) A little out of town the atmosphere at the Dokchampa is pretty welcoming and the rooms aren't bad, especially those in the main building which are large and well-equipped for the cost. There's a restaurant out front.

our pick Phouthavong Guesthouse (☎ 020-981 8440; r US\$6-8; ☎) This new family-run place is in a wonderfully quiet location down a shaded dirt road south of Rte 18A. Rooms are clean and spacious and come with satellite TV, fan or air-con, and hot water. The best rooms are upstairs overlooking the traditional wooden houses and palm trees opposite.

Attapeu Palace Hotel (☎ 211204; atppalace@yahoo.com; r US\$6-27; ☎) This 44-room monolith two streets north of Rte 18A has the best rooms in Attapeu, even if service can be a little rough. Rooms are mostly spacious and fairly clean, and anything US\$12 or above has a fridge, hot water and satellite TV. VIP rooms (US\$27) have a bathtub and are big enough to play football in. Breakfast is included in the rates of any room worth US\$12 or more. The hotel has Attapeu's only internet connection (US\$6 per hour) and is home to Attapeu Travel & Tour (see p293). The restaurant (meals US\$2 to US\$5.50), however, isn't great.

Saysekong Hotel (☎ 020-240 6844; r US\$12; ☎) Looking more like a modern mansion than a hotel, the Saysekong manages to combine river views and well-equipped rooms to make this a reasonable choice if service isn't a major requirement.

Eating & Drinking

Noodle dishes and *foe* are available during the morning at **Talat Nyai** (main market), near the bridge, and other snacks can be had at any time. There are cheap noodle and *foe* places east of the Souksomphone Guest House, including one that specialises in tasty barbecued pork.

Restaurant Viengvilay (☎ 020-599 4153; meals US\$0.50-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) It might look like a garage, but the precooked food here is delicious and fantastic value at about

US\$0.30 per dish, but get here by 7pm or you might miss out.

Restaurant Kamsay (☎ 020-2337594; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of several mainly bamboo places overlooking the Se Kong, Kamsay is mainly about sunset drinking but is also popular for its barbecued goat (US\$2 per plate). If you buy the whole beast – they're usually tied up out front praying for a busload of vegetarians – you get to drink its blood for free.

Thi Thi Restaurant (☎ 211303; Rte 18A; meals US\$1-3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Vietnamese-run place has, unsurprisingly, decent Vietnamese food but we found the service lacking.

Ban Laek Tee Neung (☎ 020-591 3580; meals US\$3-6; ☎ lunch & dinner) This Korean barbecue-style place is uniformly considered the best dining in town. The sukiyaki is good and the various *laap* are mouth-watering. Recommended.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Attapeu can be reached by boat from Sekong via the Se Kong (p292).

BUS

The Attapeu bus terminal is next to Talat Noi at Km 3 northwest of town. Rte 18A that runs south of the Bolaven Plateau remains impassable to most traffic, so all transport to or from Pakse goes via Sekong and Paksong. A 6am bus goes to Savannakhet (US\$6.50, nine to 10 hours) via Pakse, and after that there are four other buses to Pakse (US\$3.50, five to six hours, 212km) at 7.30am, 8am, 10am and 11am. You can get off any of these buses at Sekong (US\$2, two to 2½ hours, 77km) or Paksong (US\$2.50, four to five hours, 162km), and there might be an early afternoon bus that travels to Sekong only, but don't count on it. For Salavan you'll need to head off early, get a bus heading to Paksong, and change at Tha Taeng.

Gluttons for punishment might consider the 8am or 11.30am services which power on through to Vientiane (US\$11, 20 to 24 hours, 912km). Most buses servicing Attapeu are older, naturally cooled affairs.

Getting Around

A jumbo trip around town should cost about US\$0.20 per person. To/from the bus terminal costs about US\$0.40. Bicycles (US\$2 per day) and motorbikes (US\$10) can be rented from the Attapeu Palace Hotel.

AROUND ATTAPEU

Heading east on Rte 18B brings you to **Saisettha**, a sizable village 12km from Attapeu on the north bank of the Se Kaman. There is an attractive wat in use here and the whole town has a good vibe. Continue about 3km further east, across the Se Kaman (Kaman River) and take a sharp right just beyond Ban Hat Xai Khao. **Pha Meuang**, another 3km along a dirt road, is the main attraction because the Lan Xang king Saysethathirat is buried here in Wat Pha Saysettha – the stupa under which he is believed to lie is thought to have been built by his son around 1577. Just wandering around the village and wat is fun.

The area southeast of Attapeu was an integral part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (p251) and as such was heavily bombed during the war. The bombers were particularly interested in the village of **Phu Vong**, 13km southeast of the capital, where two main branches of the trail split – the Sihanouk Trail continuing south into Cambodia and the Ho Chi Minh Trail veering east towards Vietnam. The village is a pleasant diversion for an hour or two, though you won't see much war junk. To get there, cross the Se Kong (US\$0.10 each per person and motorbike) to Ban Kaman, then take a *sáwngtháew* (US\$1, 30 minutes, 13km) to Phu Vong.

Several trekking routes have been established, including some shortish hikes to waterfalls, villages and wats near Attapeu.

Pa-am

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A day-trip to Saisettha could happily be combined with a visit to the modest, tree-shaded village of **Pa-am**. About 35km east of Attapeu, Pa-am straddles both the small Nam Pa (Pa River) and a road that was formerly a branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The main attraction is a Russian **surface-to-air missile** (SAM), complete with Russian and Vietnamese stenciling,

which was set up by the North Vietnamese to defend against aerial attack. It has survived the scrap hunters by government order and, apart from a few cluster bomb casings-cum-planter boxes, there's not much else to see – it's the trip that's most fun. Alak villagers sell textiles and basic meals are available.

When coming from Attapeu you need to cross the Nam Pa to reach the missile launcher. In the dry season you can walk, at other times there is an improvised passenger and motorbike ferry. Pa-am is easily reachable by motorbike; take Rte 18B 10km towards Vietnam and keep straight on the laterite road when the sealed road bends to the right. Otherwise *sáwngtháew* run from Attapeu (US\$1.20, one hour, 35km) every morning.

Se Pian NPA

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While **Se Pian NPA** (p2710) is most accessible from Pakse, it's also possible to get into the park from Attapeu. Community-based tourism projects have recently been established and involve village homestays and treks into the eastern reaches of the area. There are one-, two- and three-day treks concentrating on a **Tat Saepha**, **Tat Samongphak** and **Tat Saeponglai**, three impressive waterfalls along branches of the Se Pian. In the rainy season some sections are of the treks are done by boat.

For now, the only English-speaking guide in the province is Mr Yae from Attapeu Travel and Tour (p293). Prices are a bit higher than elsewhere, but having someone to translate for you makes the trip, and the almost mandatory (options are extremely limited) homestay (p48) in the pretty village of **Ban Mai**, much richer.

Another way into this part of the Se Pian NPA is by taking a boat down the Se Kong towards the Cambodian border. If you fancy the road (or river) less travelled, then this might be for you. To do it, take

a *sáwngtháew* from the bus terminal in Attapeu to Sanamsay (US\$1.20, 75 minutes, 35km) along Rte 18A; *sáwngtháew* leave Attapeu at 9am, noon, 2pm and 4pm, and the last one returns at 3pm. In Sanamsay find a boatman to take you to the border (about 30km, four to five hours).

This trip is more about the travel than the destination, so don't expect a pot of gold at the end (or much in the way of services, either; BYO food, water and sun protection). The journey is, however, quite a trip. The river is abutted by deep forest for much of the way and, when we passed, dozens of Chinese dredges were tearing up the river bed in search of gold, at the same time altering navigation channels and fish spawning grounds. Fortunately the government has banned this, so hopefully they will be gone by the time you arrive, though the ugly piles of dirt might not.

To get back to Sanamsay on the same day start early (hiring a jumbo or motorbike from Attapeu might be best). There's no guesthouse in Sanamsay but if you need one someone will find you a bed.

DONG AMPHAM NPA

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Dong Ampham NPA is a 1975-sq-km protected area wedged between the Se Kaman to the

north and west, the Vietnamese border in the east and Rte 18B to the south. Timber and wildlife poaching threaten the pristine environment, but wildlife researchers still report that, for now at least, this is one of the most intact ecosystems in the country. Hydroelectric projects on the Se Kaman and Se Su rivers might change this.

In the meantime anyone with a strong constitution and five-to-seven days to spare can take what would be the trip of a lifetime into the protected area and magical **Nong Fa**. This beautiful volcanic lake, similar to but larger than Yaek Lom in Cambodia's Ratanakiri Province, was used by the North Vietnamese as an R and R for soldiers hurt on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These days it's one of the holy grails of Southeast Asian travel, much talked about by people in the know but very seldom visited.

The trip involves several days walking, staying either in Yae (Ngae) villages or camping in the forest, with a range of birds, deer, gibbons and other wildlife for company. Mr Yae at Attapeu Travel & Tour (p293) is the man to speak with; he charges US\$300 for one person, less per person for groups, between November and April only. But get in quick – plans to build a proper road to Nong Fa will probably change it forever.

CROSSING THE VIETNAM BORDER AT BO Y

Smooth new Rte 18B runs 113km to the border with Vietnam at Bo Y. The Lao government says 30-day visas should be available here, but they weren't when we checked – we recommend getting your visa in advance. The road and border only opened in mid-2006 and at the time of writing transport details were still fairly sketchy. We could confirm that at least three Vietnamese-run buses were operating each week from Attapeu to Pleiku via Kon Tum (US\$10, 12 hours), departing Attapeu at 9am Monday, Wednesday and Friday, coming the other way Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Tickets were sold at the Thi Thi Restaurant (p295) in Attapeu. By the time you arrive, expect local buses or *sáwngtháew* to be running at least as far as the border.

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