

# Why Laos is Asia's best hidden secret | Skyscanner Australia

An Asian country that slips under traveller radars in favour of better known neighbours like Vietnam and Thailand, Laos has much to offer independent travellers. Within easy (and cheap!) flight reach from Australia, [Skyscanner Australia](#) explores Luang Prabang in Laos, Asia's hidden secret travel hotspot.

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Behind its French colonial architecture and elaborately gilded Buddhist temples, or wats, mystical Laos is a keeper of secrets, myths and legends.

For starters there's the Secret War. While the USA's war in Vietnam is no secret, for nine years they were secretly bombing Laos' famed Ho Chi Minh Trail, dropping more bombs on Vietnam's neighbour than were dropped on Germany and Japan combined during WW2.



More than 40 years on, one third of Laos remains contaminated with undetonated tennis ball-sized 'bombies', killing or maiming 20,000 people since the last bomber dropped its payload. Bombies resemble toy pineapples with their sunshine yellow bodies and spiky heads, with children the most frequent victims. The proliferation of unexploded ordinances (UXO's) remains the reason rural Laos is such a challenge to travel overland. The pollution of its land also prevents this lush fertile country from reaching its potential.

## Luang Prabang Laos river boats

Laos holds French secrets too. Where the Mekong and Nam Kham Rivers collide, French colonial public servant Auguste Pavie, was an adventurer at heart who 'went native'. Pavie tried to hide the extent of his 'nateness' from superiors who had him pegged for a Diplomatic posting. It mattered not. Once he orchestrated

the clandestine removal of royal ruler Oun Kham to Bangkok, thus saving him from the flames of Siamese-occupied Luang Prabang, his diplomatic future was assured.



These days Pavie is immortalised on the door of my suite within the ancient French provincial architecture of [3 Nagas Hotel](#) in Luang Prabang's Old Quarter. Three centuries old houses with rosewood floors and lime-washed earthen walls retain their character. Creaky floors are not quite level, walls follow whimsical contours of craftsmen's hands while timber shutters repel midday heat. Recent restoration work revealed three ancient bottles of orange essence extract, salvaged from the days when Lamache House was the official ice-cream supplier to the Royal Court. Carrying on tradition, 3Nagas' ice-cream cart is set up street-side during the annual Luang Prabang Half Marathon event which attracts runners from across the globe. It's worth entering for their coconut ice-cream alone!



Charismatic warrior King Fa Ngum ruled his fourteenth century kingdom from Luang Prabang when it was known as Xiengdong Xiengthong, invading and conquering territories to create present-day Laos. According to legend, Fa Ngum was born with 33 teeth, considered cursed and his father the King was ordered to kill the child. Present day Laos would be far different had his father not covertly defied the Court.



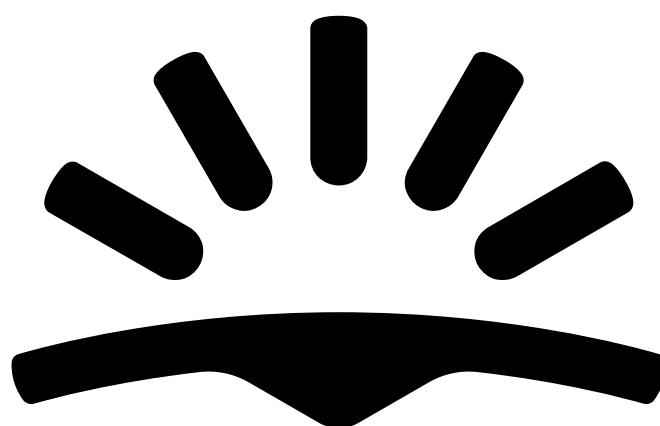
The former royal capital, once known as the 'Refuge of the Last Dreamers' is a riot of colour. Barefooted saffron-robed monks receive alms pre-dawn from the faithful in a tradition reaching back to the 14th century. Elaborately gilded temples line the streets, some so bedazzling in the sunshine it's impossible to look at them without sunglasses.

The Morning Market is awash with colourful piles of melons and mangosteen, galangal and garlic, paw paw and pigs trotters. Carrots and cane toads too, all shaded beneath scarlet umbrellas.





Nagas are fabled serpent spirits thought to protect this ancient town though a UNESCO World Heritage Listing is potentially more likely to ensure tradition is preserved. Beyond the arrival of motorised boats and tuk tuks, river life still flows pretty slowly in these parts. Village elders conduct blessing to acknowledge significant events by tying cotton around believers' wrists. Fields of beans are tilled with simple ploughs on the banks of the softly flowing Nam Khan River which sustains life but conversely destroys it as floodgates upstream in China dictate its flow.



Laos was known as the Land of a Million Elephants before they were virtually wiped out by the logging industry which used them for hard labour in the forests that cling to steep-sided mountains. Now endangered with less than 1,000 thought to survive, Elephant Village is a privately owned elephant camp focused

on protection and rehabilitation. Mahouts use gentle words rather than barbaric hooks to cajole elephants who have found sanctuary on the banks of the Nam Khan.

Narrow longboats ply the river while further upstream tumultuous terraces of the Tad Sae Waterfall are awash with glacial-coloured water, its milky turquoise hue incongruously out of place in the tropical jungle. Tad Sae is a popular spot for both locals and visitors with multiple pools, food stall vendors and a small restaurant planked right atop the gurgling water.

Tad See waterfall

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## About the author

Fiona Harper is known as one of Australia's best travel writers. Follow her at [Travel Boating Lifestyle](#)

