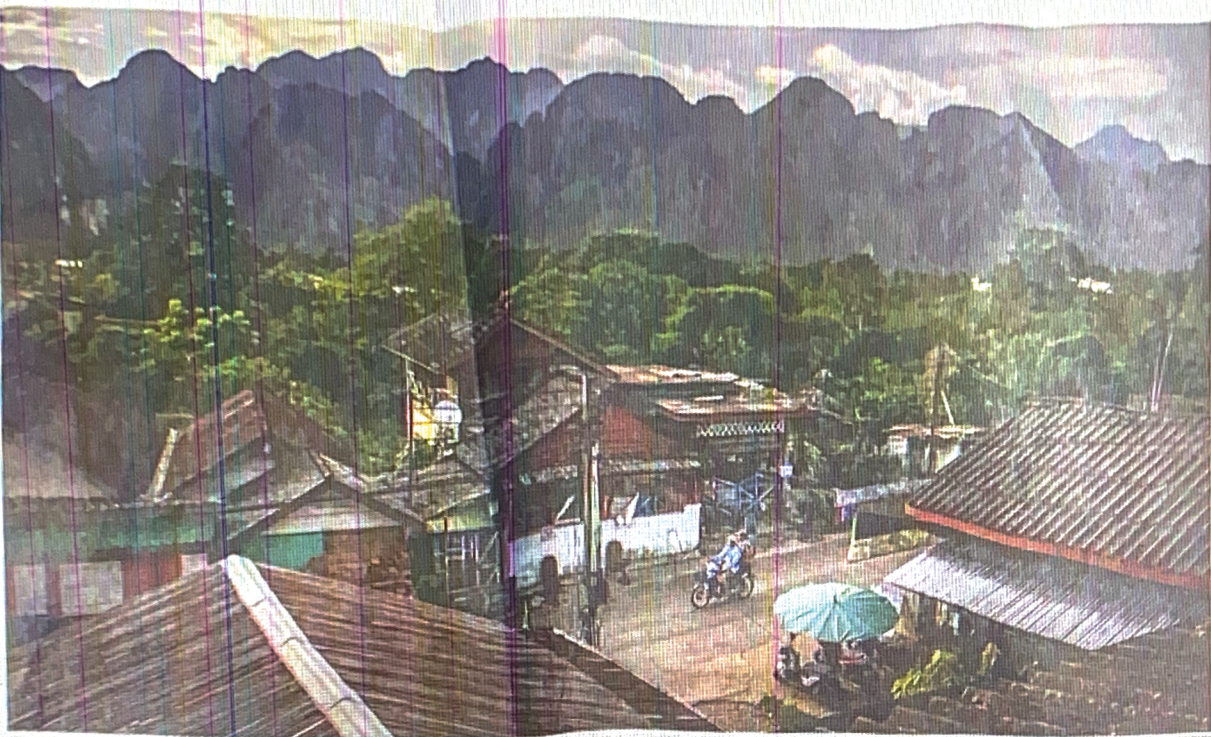


Travel



Plan Seeks to Put Laos on the Right Track

The government hopes new hotels, roads and a train system will increase tourism.

By CHRISTINE CHUNG

Laos, a place that feels stuck in time, is at the precipice of change.

Backpackers found the country decades ago, drawn by staggeringly beautiful limestone mountains, elaborate Buddhist temples and an unhurried and inexpensive pace of life. Only the most intrepid travelers followed, as Laos, Southeast Asia's only landlocked country, operated few — and no long-haul — flights, and potholes and shoddy roads were the norm. Those who made it traded no-frills accommodations and hours-long bumpy drives for adventure, and almost always tacked Laos onto multi-country itineraries that included neighboring Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, all well-oiled tourism machines that each draw at least three times the number of visitors than Laos annually.

Laos wants to change that. While flights remain limited, the country's visitor infrastructure has strengthened in recent years with new hotels, improved highways and, most notably, a new train system that runs as fast as 100 miles per hour and connects some of the country's most popular tourism destinations. The government designated 2024 a national tourism year, expanding visa waivers, improving tour guide training, and holding dozens of grand festivals.

Yet the country and its tourism industry were shaken in November, when at least six young tourists fell ill in the town of Vang Vieng and later died. Officials suspect methanol-tainted alcohol is the cause.

I had visited Vang Vieng in July, when my partner, Eli, and I set out for a weeklong trip in Laos. We had wondered what it would be like to visit a country on the cusp of a potential tourism boom, particularly one with a longstanding reputation as an inexpensive, under-the-radar destination. We traveled mostly by rail, but also by bus, to find out.

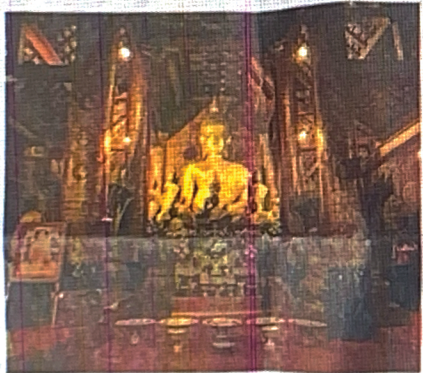
A New Route to Old Favorites

Laos has been trying to build back the record tourism numbers it reached in 2019, when 4.8 million foreign tourists visited. Last year, according to the Lao government, it succeeded, with more than five million tourists visiting. The Lao-China Railway, which runs from Vientiane, the capital of Laos, to Kunming in southern China, is key to the momentum.

The \$8 billion project, financed by China, is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative that aims to connect countries across five continents; Laos is a key hub for China to reach the rest of Southeast Asia. The Lao-China Railway opened in late 2021 for journeys within Laos, and cross-border train service between Laos and China began in 2023. Laos, a one-party communist state, has strong ties with China and is deeply reliant on Chinese investments to fund its infrastructure projects.

The semi-high-speed train will whisk you to cities and towns with drastically different landscapes in just an hour or two, replacing the car or bus rides that used to take all day. The train now offers seamless journeys to Vientiane, the most industrial part of Laos, and where malls and temples coexist; to Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with dozens of elaborate Buddhist temples and elegant French colonial villas; and to Vang Vieng, an outdoor adventure hot spot where tourists explore the area's craggy limestone mountains, caves and lagoons, and dance until the early morning at raucous bars.

The railway is a tourism attraction itself. Its behemoth stations feature peaked red roofs and cavernous waiting rooms full of hundreds of people lining up to board trains. During our trip, they departed right on the dot. But the stations almost seemed like



ble floors made us feel like we were in a time warp. We took breaks from the city's swampy humidity in the hotel pool, which was ringed by a lush garden.

But the center of luxury travel in Laos is undoubtedly Luang Prabang. Amanata, an Aman Group resort, opened more than a decade ago, and in 2018, Rosewood Hotel Group opened an opulent 23-room resort on a secluded property.

Travelers, too, are becoming increasingly aware of Laos and its allure.

While it remains sought after as an add-on for other Southeast Asia itineraries, interest in Laos is rising, said Heather Heverling, a managing director at Austley Travels, a tour operator based in Britain. From January to October 2024, the company's bookings quadrupled compared with the same period in 2022.

"It used to be that travelers really just went to Luang Prabang and that was it," said Catherine Heald, a co-founder of Remote Lands, a New York-based travel agency that exclusively works in Asia. "It's a more viable destination now."

On the Bus to Nong Khai

With just two days remaining, Eli and I visited Nong Khai, a rural town that was a three-hour drive from Luang Prabang. Enticed by pictures and reviews online, we decided to spend a night there. The journey was deeply uncomfortable. We were crammed in a small van with about a dozen sweaty people sitting thigh to thigh. There was no air-conditioning (the temperature outside was around 90 degrees) and only the suggestion of a breeze. Portions of the roads were unpaved and filled with ditches. I really missed the train.

But it was worth it. Nong Khai's limestone karst landscape loomed over the placid Nam Ou River, where water buffalo rested languidly on the riverbanks. We barely saw anybody else there.

It was also extremely cheap. Comfortable lodging throughout Laos is generally under \$100 a night. In Nong Khai, we paid \$32 for a night at the Nong Khai River Side, a charming riverside hotel that had an excellent restaurant serving fresh spring rolls and noodle soups.

The experiences we had there were the best ones of the trip. Eli embarked on a six-hour trek up to an overlook called Pha Dong Peak and enjoyed sweeping panoramic views of mountains ribboned with mist and the curving Nam Ou River. I crossed a rickety bridge through a rice paddy to visit Tham Pha Thok, a cluster of caves where villagers hid during the Vietnam War.

One night, we went to Hive Bar, a drinking spot beloved by tourists. I asked Thieng Soudakone, the bar's owner, how he felt about the tourism changes and increased development. He welcomed the train, he said, but Nong Khai was different from other tourism spots, and he hoped it stayed that way.

"We still have more nature and it's a peaceful, quiet place," Mr. Soudakone, 45, said. "No big hotels and hostels, no traffic here yet. The tourists here prefer a bumpy road like this. They don't need prosperity or civilization in their holiday. They spend their lives closer to locals."

It's this feeling that lured Nabeel Nasran back to Laos after his first visit six years ago. I met Mr. Nasran, a bartender from Singapore, on the van to Nong Khai, as he was backpacking through Thailand, Laos and Vietnam with his girlfriend, Celina.

Mr. Nasran, 27, said that the ride to Nong Khai was better because of road improvements. Laos felt busier this time around, he said, especially in Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang, but the country still had an undeniably peaceful and remote atmosphere.

"People have always said this is the last frontier of Southeast Asia," he said. "I just love the quiet life here."



they were in a soft opening. In Vientiane, the vending machine was empty and businesses on the second floor had yet to open. The train zips through verdant farmland and swampy rice paddies and into the darkness of mountain tunnels. The fare is affordable; a two-hour ride from Luang Prabang to Vientiane cost under \$20. But only those with local phone numbers can purchase a ticket on the train's app; the rest have to use middlemen services, easily available online, or wait in line. (Hotels can generally also help arrange rail travel.)

Guided Temples and Riverside Bars

I found the train to be an almost effortless way to travel through Laos and experience the country's very different lifestyles.

In Vientiane, we walked through gilded temples, stayed in old French colonial villas and strolled by the Mekong River at night, where an amusement park, night market, bars and open-air restaurants with a food on ice welcomed patrons. While we had many fantastic and affordable meals throughout the trip, the best was at Doi Ka Noi, a convivial restaurant where the seasonal menu changes weekly; we paid about \$30 for lunch for two. Their crispy rice salad featuring sour pork and fragrant herbs is reason enough to visit to Vientiane.

Other highlights included a visit to Ock Pop Tok, a textile collective based in Luang Prabang, where we watched artisan weavers hard at their craft. In Vang Vieng, we booked an excursion with Green Discovery, a local tour operator. We paddled kayaks on the Nam Song River and went tubing in a cave.

Top, Vang Vieng, Laos. Middle row, from left: Wat Xiengthong, one of the many temples that led the city of Luang Prabang to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site; food service on the railway. Above, poolside at the Setha Palace Hotel.

Comfortable lodging throughout Laos is generally under \$100.

Vang Vieng has long had a reputation as a party spot — a destination of dangerous hedonism even — for international backpackers seeking drugs and alcohol. In recent years, officials tried to tamp down the partying, closing many of its riverside bars after dozens of fatal tub accidents. When the six travelers sickened there last fall and later died, the town made international news. At least eight hotel workers, according to local press reports, were arrested and detained by the police in connection to the deaths.

Shifting Patterns?

Aside from the train, new highways have begun replacing once-treacherous roads ridden with potholes. In well-trodden areas, tour operators and services are abundant, and even in sleeper places, I saw numerous hotels under construction.

At the Kuang Si waterfall, a multiterred waterfall with startlingly aquamarine waters south of Luang Prabang, there's a golf cart service to the parking lot and a new zip line winding through the forest. A sturdy metal staircase to the base of the waterfall has replaced a series of decrepit and slippery wooden stairs.

In 2024, major hotel brands, including Doubletree by Hilton, the Eastin and the Holiday Inn, opened locations in Vientiane — a vote of confidence in the country and its growing tourism demand.

We stayed at the Setha Palace Hotel (two nights, \$240), a boutique hotel built by the French in the 1930s and later restored by a Lao family. Its rosewood furnishings (including stately four-poster beds) and mar-