

LAOS: LANGUAGE, DIALECTS & ETHICAL COMMUNICATION GUIDE

Language is the bridge to the gentle soul of Laos. While English is spoken in tourist areas like Luang Prabang and Vientiane, attempting to speak Lao (the official language) shows respect and will be met with warm smiles.

This guide introduces you to the structure of Lao, regional dialects, essential vocabulary for responsible travel, and the rules of "ethical bargaining."

1. UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE & TONES

Lao is a tonal language. The meaning of a word depends entirely on the pitch or tone with which you pronounce it.

- **Tonal System:** Depending on the region, Lao has 5 or 6 different tones (low, mid, high, rising, falling, and low-falling).
- **Pronunciation Tip:** The pitch is crucial, but don't let it worry you. Lao people are incredibly welcoming and will understand you based on the context of your conversation. Keep your voice gentle and slow.

2. THE ART OF "ETHICAL BARGAINING" (HUCK-HAH POLITELY)

Lao culture is famously relaxed (Sabai Sabai). Public confrontation is highly avoided. Bargaining is common in tourist markets (like the Luang Prabang Night Market), but it must be done with gentleness and respect.

The "Sabaidee Morning" First Sale Custom



First Sale of the Day

The Belief: Lao merchants believe that the first transaction of the morning sets the tone and financial luck for their entire day. A smooth, friendly first sale ensures high revenue and spiritual luck for the shop.

The Taboo: Never bargain aggressively, express frustration, or walk away without buying during the morning's first sale (typically between 8:00 AM – 9:30 AM).

The Ethical Choice: If you are the first customer of the day, keep the negotiation brief and friendly, and try to make a purchase to support their daily business luck.

Value Local Craftsmanship (Luang Prabang Night Market)

The Luang Prabang Night Market is famous for beautiful hand-woven silks and textiles. These items are made by local women in rural weaving villages (like Ban Phanom), often taking days or weeks to complete. When buying hand-made crafts, pay a price that reflects the labor involved. Do not haggle aggressively over a few thousand Lao Kip (\$0.50 – \$1.00 USD) that means very little to you but represents a day's livelihood for a local family.

The Gentle "Sabai Sabai" Style of Negotiation

Lao people value quietness. Raising your voice, haggling aggressively, or showing frustration is considered highly embarrassing and shameful (Aiy). Always bargain with a warm smile and a soft voice. If the price is too high, say "Paeng lai" (Too expensive!) with a laugh, and ask gently: "Lod dai bor?" (Can you discount?). If they cannot lower the price, say "Khob chai" (Thank you) and walk away politely.

KNOW WHEN NOT TO BARGAIN

- **Food Stalls & Markets:** Do not negotiate the price of street food, fruit, or drinks.

- **Social Cooperatives:** Never bargain at social enterprise cafes (such as Jhai Coffee House or Saffron Coffee) or fair-trade craft shops (like Ock Pop Tok). Profits are used to support local farmers and fund clean water projects in schools.

4. ESSENTIAL VOCABULARY FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVELERS

Greetings & Politeness

Lao culture uses the polite particle "Chao" (meaning yes/please/respect) at the end of sentences.

English	Lao	Pronunciation
Hello	Sabaidee	<i>Sah-bye-dee</i>
Thank you	Khob chai	<i>Khob-chy</i>
Excuse me / Sorry	Khor thot	<i>Khor-thot</i>
Goodbye	Sook dee	<i>Sook-dee</i>
Yes	Chao	<i>Chow</i>
No, thank you (Polite refusal)	Bor, khob chai	<i>Bor, khob-chy</i>

Sustainable Communication

Use these phrases to refuse single-use plastics at street markets and restaurants.

English	Lao	Pronunciation
No plastic bag, please.	Bor ao thong plastic, chao	<i>Bor ao thong plahs-teek, chow</i>
No straw, please.	Bor ao lod, chao	<i>Bor ao loh-d, chow</i>
Please refill my bottle.	Sai nam hai dae	<i>Sai nahm hai dae</i>

Dining & Market Basics

Useful phrases for eco-conscious travelers and vegetarians.

English	Lao	Pronunciation
I am vegetarian	Khoy kin chay	<i>Khoy keen chy</i>
No meat, please	Bor kin sin, chao	<i>Bor keen seen, chow</i>
Not spicy, please	Bor phet, chao	<i>Bor phet, chow</i>
How much is this?	Tao dai?	<i>Tao-dy?</i>
Delicious!	Sep lai!	<i>Sep-ly!</i>

Emergency Basics

Keep these phrases in mind for safety.

English	Lao	Pronunciation
Help!	Chuay doi!	<i>Chu-ay doy!</i>
Hospital	Hong mor	<i>Hong-mor</i>
Doctor	Than mor	<i>Than-mor</i>