

DOS AND DON'TS IN LAOS

Welcome to Laos! As you journey through this peaceful land of mountains and rivers, from the spiritual streets of Luang Prabang to the limestone karsts of Vang Vieng, your actions shape the destination.

This guide is designed to help you navigate Lao etiquette, participate respectfully in Buddhist traditions, support local communities, and minimize your environmental impact.

PHASE 1: BEFORE YOUR TRIP (PREPARATION)

Being a responsible traveler starts before you even leave home. Making smart choices during packing and planning sets the stage for a sustainable journey.

 DO	 DON'T
Pack conservative clothes & a sarong. For temple visits, you must cover shoulders and knees. Women are encouraged to wear a traditional Lao skirt (Sinh) or wrap a sarong around their legs.	Bring plastic bags or excess packaging. Laos has very limited plastic recycling facilities. Remove tags and packaging before packing.
Pack biodegradable soap & shampoo. If you plan to swim in natural pools, waterfalls, or rivers, biodegradable products prevent water pollution.	Plan a rushed, packed itinerary. Lao culture is famously relaxed. Embrace "Sabai Sabai" (the slow, peaceful pace of life) and take your time.
Pack a reusable water bottle. Many guesthouses and restaurants in Luang Prabang and Vientiane offer free filtered water refills to help reduce plastic waste.	Bring chemical-heavy sunscreens. Standard sunscreens contain ingredients that damage aquatic ecosystems in waterfalls like Kuang Si.
Learn about UXO (Unexploded Ordnance) safety. Laos is the most heavily bombed country in history. Read about UXO safety if you plan to trek in remote areas.	Forget to pack a light jacket. Mountainous Northern Laos can get surprisingly cold during the winter months (November to February).

PHASE 2: DURING YOUR TRIP (ON THE ROAD)

1. Cultural Etiquette & Social Respect

Lao people are gentle, soft-spoken, and deeply respectful. Modesty and calm behavior are highly valued in Lao society.

 DO	 DON'T
Greet others with the "Nop" gesture. Press your palms together at chin level with a slight bow and say "Sabaidee" (Hello).	Touch or pat anyone's head. The head is considered the highest and most sacred part of the body. Do not touch anyone, including children.
Remove shoes before entering. Take off your shoes and hats when entering a Buddhist temple (Sim), a local home, or businesses displaying shoes outside.	Point your feet at anyone or sacred items. Feet are considered dirty. Avoid pointing your feet at people, Buddha statues, or temple altars.
Keep public affection private. Avoid public displays of affection (holding hands is fine, but kissing or hugging in public is frowned upon).	Lose your temper or raise your voice. Showing anger or shouting in public is considered extremely rude and will cause everyone to "lose face."
Ask permission before taking photos. Always ask politely before taking photos of locals, monks, or inside temples.	Dress inappropriately in temples. Never wear sleeveless tops, short shorts, or low-cut shirts when visiting temples or sacred sites.

2. The Alms Giving Ceremony (Tak Bat) in Luang Prabang

Participating in or observing the sacred morning Alms Giving ceremony requires strict respect to preserve this living Buddhist tradition.

 DO	 DON'T
Dress modestly. Keep shoulders, chest, and legs fully covered. Women should wear a shawl (Pha Biang) or wrap a traditional Sinh over their legs.	Disrupt the procession or get too close. Keep a respectful distance of at least 2 meters from the monks. Do not block their path.
Observe quietly. If you are not participating, stand across the street or behind the alms-givers. Maintain absolute silence during the ceremony.	Use camera flash. Flash photography is highly disruptive and disrespectful to the monks. Turn off your camera flash.
Buy food in advance. If you participate, buy fresh sticky rice from local markets in the morning. Avoid buying low-quality food from street vendors at the site.	Make physical contact with the monks. Women must be especially careful not to touch monks or their bowls. Place your offering gently.

3. Economic Responsibility & Community Support

Make sure your travel dollars benefit the local people directly and support sustainable livelihoods.

 DO	 DON'T
Shop at night markets & pay fair prices. Purchase beautiful, hand-woven Lao silks, cottons, and handicrafts directly from local weavers.	Bargain aggressively. Bargaining is done gently in Laos. Smile, keep it friendly, and do not fight over small sums of money.
Eat local Lao food. Try sticky rice (Khao Niew) served in woven baskets, Laap (minced herb salad), and locally grown organic coffee.	Buy wildlife-derived souvenirs. Never purchase items made from ivory, tiger bones, bear claws, or rare wood species (e.g. rosewood).
Support community-based tourism. Stay in local guesthouses, hire local community guides, and visit ethnic villages with a licensed guide.	Give handouts directly to children. Avoid giving money, candy, or pens to children in villages. It promotes begging. Donate to schools or NGOs instead.

4. Environmental Care & Waterfall Etiquette

Laos' pristine rivers and waterfalls are stunning, but they are also sacred and ecologically sensitive.

 DO	 DON'T
Observe swimming dress codes. Respect Lao modesty by wearing a T-shirt and shorts/sarong over your swimwear. Local people never swim in bikinis.	Use chemical sunscreen before swimming. At waterfalls like Kuang Si, wash off sunscreen or use mineral/reef-safe versions to protect aquatic life.
Prioritize the High-Speed Railway (LCR). Use the electric high-speed train for travel between Vientiane, Vang Vieng, and Luang Prabang to reduce emissions.	Litter on trails or in water. Laos lacks comprehensive trash collection. Carry all plastic bottles and wrappers back to your hotel in town.

 DO	 DON'T
Stay on marked paths in conservation zones. Avoid trampling sensitive plants or causing soil erosion around waterfalls and cave paths.	Swim in restricted sacred pools. Many waterfalls have specific pools reserved for spirits or wildlife. Respect all "No Swimming" signs.

PHASE 3: AFTER YOUR TRIP (RETURNING HOME)

Your responsible travel journey doesn't end when you return home. You can continue to advocate for sustainable practices and maintain a positive long-term impact on Laos.

 DO	 DON'T
Recommend local family-run businesses. Leave online reviews naming specific local guesthouses, small restaurants, and community-guided tours to help them thrive.	Post photos that compromise local dignity. Avoid sharing photos of local people, monks, or children in vulnerable situations on social media without their consent or context.
Support UXO clearance & victims. Consider supporting or sharing the work of reputable Lao organizations like COPE Laos or MAG (Mines Advisory Group) who help clear unexploded bombs and rehabilitate survivors.	Vent publicly about slow service. In Lao culture, rushing is considered uncouth. Avoid writing negative public reviews about slow-paced services; send constructive private feedback to Travel Sense Asia instead.
Keep the "Sabai Sabai" spirit. Integrate the gentle, slow, and mindful lifestyle habits you practiced in Laos back into your daily routine.	Forget about carbon mitigation. Don't let your awareness of environmental impacts fade; consider carbon-offset options or supporting forest protection initiatives in Laos.

EMERGENCY CONTACTS (LAOS)

Police: 191
Fire: 190
Ambulance: 195
Tourist Police (Vientiane): 021 251 128
Tourist Police (Luang Prabang): 071 212 453
Travel Sense Asia 24/7 Hotline: [Provided in your booking voucher]
Email: info@travelsense.asia