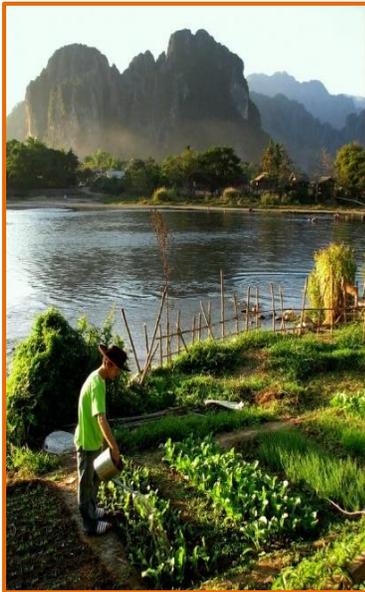


CULTURE AND CUSTOMS

Laos has a rich history stretching back 10,000 years. The population of Laos is made of up of more than 100 different ethnic groups, with each having their own distinct clothing, language, customs and way of life.



The **Lao Loum**, "lowland Lao" who reside in the in the river plains and mostly along the Mekong region, make up **the largest ethnic group** (about half of the population in Laos). Officially, this group includes the **Lao Tai**, who are subdivided into numerous subgroups. The **Lao Theung (20-30%)**, or "upland Lao", live on mid-altitude slopes (officially defined as 300-900m), and are by far the poorest group, formerly used as slave labor by the Lao Loum. The ethnic group. The **Lao Sung (10-30%)** covers mostly Hmong and Mien tribes who live higher up in the mountains and which have been moving into Laos due to suppression in China about 200 years ago. Due to the lack of land and the warmer climate, the Lao Sung (e.g. Hmong) have been living in rougher mountain areas since then. Many tribes share cultural similarities with tribes from neighbouring countries, so it's possible to see Chinese, Vietnamese, Khmer and Thai influences within the dress, food and arts of these people.



Generally, Laotians are known for their **laidback lifestyle** and **calm, steady approach to life**. With emphasis on the simple pleasures of family, food and religion, most people from Laos remain closely connected to their family and village for a lifetime. Most Laotians live in villages, rather than the city, where the sense of community is strong and people are connected to their neighbours and friends. Rice cultivation, animal husbandry, raising silk worms and handicrafts were main occupations. Additional activities are trading, fishery, workers in the plants or officials.

Here Buddhism permeates every facet of life. As with all cultures everywhere in the world, there are some general rules of conduct that a traveler to Laos should follow. When sitting down, **feet should point away** from the altar and main image. In general, **pointing with the index finger** is considered rude. **Patting Laos people on the head** should be avoided, as it is the most sacred part

of the body. The traditional form of greeting is with hands together, prayer-like and with head bowed, as in most part of Asia, but handshaking is done more frequently today.

Sensitivity also pays when **taking photographs**. Be very wary in areas that have (or could have) military importance such as airports, where all photography is prohibited. Also be careful when photographing official functions and parades without permission. Always ask for permission before photographing a person or in a temple.

Laos is a Buddhist country and guests should **dress accordingly**. Shorts or revealing clothes are never acceptable. For women, sarongs work well in the heat as do long-sleeved light cotton shirts. Shoes must be removed when entering a religious building or somebody's home. A small donation is advisable when visiting wats, and it is appreciated to kneel down when giving it. It is best to **avoid the time round 11 a.m. when visiting a wat**, as this is when monks usually take their last meal of the day.

The Lao government prohibits **sexual relationships**, including sexual contact between foreign citizens and Lao nationals, except when the two parties have been married in accordance with Lao family law. Penalties for failing to register a relationship range from fines to imprisonment.



Religious beliefs should be respected. **Women should not touch monks**, attempt to shake the hand of a monk, hand anything to him or sit beside him, since monks are not allowed to touch women. Visiting wats (temples) to make offerings and **give alms to monks** is a common part of daily life for most, with much respect and reverence reserved for monks. Buddhist holidays and traditional festivals linked to harvest time and holy periods are commonly celebrated throughout the villages of Laos and are timed according to lunar cycles.