

# Community Service & the Environment (11 days)

## Laos



**Please note: This itinerary can be modified to best suit your school's aims, learning objectives and budget.**

What defines quintessential Laos? Think tuk-tuks, elephants, saffron-robed monks, vibrant temples, hill tribes, the mighty Mekong River, French colonial architecture, and a deeply respectful culture. Laos offers curious travellers a window into its rich history alongside pressing modern challenges, such as the overuse of the Mekong River and governance influenced by Chinese and Vietnamese policies, despite sharing more cultural similarities with Thailand. Lacking heavy industry, Laos struggles to boost its GDP, and infrastructure projects often come with significant environmental impacts and unforeseen consequences.

This 11-day adventure through Laos is specifically tailored for students. It begins with an introductory tour of the capital, Vientiane, providing context and setting the tone for the journey ahead. Key highlights include kayaking and cycling in Vang Vieng, and visiting the remote province of Phonsavan to explore the legacy of the Vietnam War and the enigmatic Plain of Jars. The trip

concludes in the charming city of Luang Prabang, featuring a great race urban challenge, a cooking class, and a cruise along the vital Mekong River, alongside various cultural and outdoor activities.

Importantly, students will collaborate on a community project to renovate a rural school, enhancing facilities and educational resources for a disadvantaged community. This itinerary is designed to be thought-provoking, hands-on, and fosters a sense of solidarity, allowing students to give back to a country they will come to appreciate deeply.

## Day 1

### Arrive Laos (Vientiane)



Upon arrival in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, we are welcomed at the airport by our tour leader. The trip begins with a briefing to outline the activities planned for the coming days. Vientiane's charm lies in its relaxed atmosphere, from its unhurried tuk-tuk drivers to its scenic riverfront. Despite its tranquil vibe, subtle reminders of its political history, such as hammer and sickle slogans, can still be seen along the broader boulevards.

Our first stop is the Anousavari Monument, a structure inspired by Paris's Arc de Triomphe. It was built to honour those who lost their lives during the civil conflict of the 1960s and 1970s. Climbing to the top provides stunning panoramic views of the city. Here, our local guide offers a historical overview, covering Vientiane's French colonial past, the fall of the Royal family, and the rise of the communist government in 1975, which remains in power today. Next, we visit the Pak San market precinct. Armed with some basic bargaining tips learned en route, students can put their skills to the test in hopes of snagging a few deals. We end the day with dinner at a riverside restaurant, enjoying the serene views of the Mekong River as the sun sets. *(meals: dinner)*

## Day 2

### Vientiane - Vang Vieng



A short walk from our hotel brings us to Wat Prakeo, once home to the revered Emerald Buddha. Here, we gain insights into Buddhism in Laos, including the rigorous training undertaken by novice monks. For most Laotian men, becoming a novice monk for several years is considered a rite of passage and a significant aspect of their cultural and spiritual journey.

A 30-minute drive leads us to a visit at a centre for disabled women. After delivering supplies and donations, we meet with the management team, who provide an overview of Laos' social services. They discuss the roles and challenges faced by women in society, the pervasive social stigmas, and the limitations of the country's basic healthcare system.

In the early afternoon, we begin our journey to Vang Vieng, located in central Laos. The scenery transitions from rolling hills to striking karst landscapes as we approach this picturesque valley by evening. After dinner, we take a leisurely walk through the quiet town, exploring the impact of tourism on this traditionally conservative region and its delicate environment. *(meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)*

## Day 3

### Vang Vieng



This morning we take a leisurely bicycle tour out amongst rural villages to experience life in the countryside. Crossing a long swing bridge, we visit a well-known cave to learn about the peculiar ecosystems of Vang Vieng. We continue our cycling tour, travelling over an abandoned Vietnam War-era runway and stop to explore quiet villages along the way. Cycling towards the Nam Song River, we swap our bikes for kayaks. After a quick lesson and instructions, we kayak for an hour downriver through stunning scenery led by qualified and experienced river guides. Changing to more appropriate attire, we bike back to town to visit a local school. Here we

see first-hand how a rural school operates once we meet the principal and staff. At the end of the day's classes, we get together with local students and have the chance to play football or volleyball. Tonight, we discuss the recent economic developments this town has undergone, notice some visible impacts, and contemplate what it means to be a responsible and mindful travellers in a foreign country. *(meals: breakfast, dinner)*

## Day 4

### Vang Vieng - Phonsavan (Plain of Jars)



We travel along the 236 km winding road to Phonsavan, a remote province in eastern Laos. During the Vietnam War, Phonsavan served as a vital strategic hub for communist guerrilla forces, making it a target for covert American bombing campaigns. It holds the grim distinction of being the most heavily bombed area in the world on a per capita basis. Evidence of this remains visible, with cratered landscapes scattered across the countryside.

We visit the enigmatic Plain of Jars, an archaeological site featuring clusters of massive stone jars. Believed to have been used for funerary purposes during the Stone Age (500 BC – 500 AD), the origins of the jars and how they were transported to their current locations remain a mystery. Our local guide provides insight into prevailing theories and shares the latest findings about the pottery, iron, and bronze artefacts found at the three main sites.

Later, we visit a Hmong village, home to one of Laos' significant ethnic minority groups. Known as Montagnards ("mountain people") by the French, the Hmong continue to live in traditional homes and maintain their cultural practices. They wear their vibrant traditional attire and pass down a rich oral history. On weekends, the community gathers at the lively Sunday market, a hub for trade, socialising, and exchanging ideas.

We also take time to explore the surrounding countryside, learning about local agricultural methods, self-sustainability, and waste management practices, gaining a deeper understanding of rural life in Laos. (meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)

## Day 5

### Phonsavan - Luang Prabang



Today, we depart the remote province of Phonsavan and head northwest through the mountainous terrain towards the enchanting town of Luang Prabang. The journey takes most of the day, with several stops to break up the drive and enjoy the stunning scenery. Luang Prabang is renowned for its French colonial charm and timeless architecture. As the spiritual heart of Buddhism in Laos, the town is home to numerous beautiful temples. Situated at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers, it was a strategic location, prompting the French to establish a significant settlement here between 1900 and 1950.

Upon arrival, we check into our hotel before exploring the UNESCO World Heritage-listed old town. In the evening, we visit the vibrant night market, where local handicrafts, silks, and weavings are on display. Dinner is enjoyed at a cosy riverside eatery, offering picturesque views of the Mekong River. (meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)

## Days 6 & 7

### Luang Prabang



To deepen our understanding of Luang Prabang, we participate in a Great Race challenge. Dividing into teams of 4-6 students, we navigate the town and its surroundings, completing various tasks designed to uncover the cultural and social fabric of the area. The challenge includes a steep hike to the summit of Mt. Phousi and tuk-tuk rides to secret locations. Armed with a set of incomplete instructions, students must purchase specific items, observe the local infrastructure—or its absence—and, of course, compete against other teams.

In the afternoon, we switch to bicycles for a ride through town, crossing a historic French-built bridge into the countryside. Following scenic country roads and hidden lanes, we visit a handicraft village to observe traditional paper-making and silk weaving. Local families have established small businesses, refining their crafts and contributing to the preservation of these artisanal skills.

As part of our environmental focus, we visit an elephant conservation centre. Here, we learn about efforts to protect and rehabilitate Laos' elephant population. Walking alongside the elephants and helping to feed them provides a memorable, hands-on experience. The centre's staff share critical insights into the challenges of elephant conservation, including deforestation, habitat loss, and elephant-human conflict. With fewer than 800 elephants remaining in Laos—half in the wild and half in captivity—the plight of these animals is stark. Many captive elephants are exploited for logging or tourism, and there is little incentive for owners to breed them, as pregnant elephants are not seen as economically productive. Our next stop is the UXO (Unexploded Ordnance) Centre, where we learn about the devastating legacy of bombings in Laos. Between 1964 and 1973, more than two million tons of bombs were dropped, with an estimated 30% failing to detonate. This has left Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world. The centre provides sobering insights into the nation's ongoing efforts to clear these dangerous remnants. The museum also showcases defused ordnance of various types, highlighting the scale of the problem. (meals: 2 breakfasts, 1 lunch, 1 dinner)

## Days 8 & 9

### Luang Prabang – Community Project



This morning, we venture into the countryside to begin a two-day school renovation and improvement project. Our focus is on practical building and labour tasks, aimed at enhancing the facilities of an under-resourced school. The work includes repairing doors, frames, and windows, as well as assisting in the construction of a library and resource centre. Dividing into small groups, we take on various tasks such as cutting flooring, painting, hammering, sawing, and transporting materials. Local tradespeople and our tour leader provide guidance and supervision throughout the project. They also identify students with specific skills to

take on more complex tasks, ensuring the work is both efficient and a valuable learning experience for everyone involved. (meals: 2 breakfasts, 2 lunches, 1 dinner)

## Day 10

### Luang Prabang - Krung Si



Continuing our focus on environmental awareness, we visit the stunning Kuang Si Waterfalls. This three-tiered cascade is famous for its striking turquoise waters and unspoiled natural surroundings. Nearby, we explore the Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre, established in 2003 in collaboration with the Department of Forestry. The centre is home to over two dozen Asian black bears, including moon bears, rescued from dire conditions. These bears were often victims of the illegal bile trade, where they were confined to tiny cages and repeatedly harvested for their bile, a sought-after ingredient in traditional medicine.

Others were poached for food or kept as pets. The dedicated staff provide insights into the challenges of bear conservation and rehabilitation, with ample opportunity for us to ask questions.

Books are a rare luxury for many in rural Laos, so we take a walk to the Luang Prabang Library. The library supports education in remote schools through its Book Bag program, which delivers books and resources directly to rural classrooms.

In the evening, we celebrate our final night in Laos with a traditional Baci ceremony, hosted by local elders. This Laotian ritual, accompanied by folk music and dancing, symbolises unity and good fortune. We'll likely be invited to join the dancing, marking a festive and memorable conclusion to our journey. (meals: breakfast, dinner)

## Day 11

### Luang Prabang - Pak Ou Caves – Depart Laos



This morning, we head to the river port and board a private boat for an upstream journey to the Pak Ou Caves. Our local guide provides an in-depth explanation of Buddhism, sharing the significance of the thousands of religious statues and images that fill the caves. These caves are an important spiritual site, drawing devout Buddhist pilgrims throughout the year. In the 1950s, the caves also served a strategic purpose, used by French soldiers as a military post due to their commanding view of the Mekong River.

On the return trip to Luang Prabang, we pass beneath the Chinese-built high-speed railway, part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which connects central China through Laos to eastern Thailand. Our guide discusses the project's political and environmental implications, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities it presents for Laos.

We arrive back in Luang Prabang in time for lunch and to finalise packing. Our tour leader and local guide then accompany us to the airport, bidding us farewell as we board our flight, bringing our journey to a close.  
(meals: breakfast, lunch)

## Summary

### Grading

**Moderate;** To get the most out of this trip, you need to be in good health. However, anyone with a good level of fitness will be able to take part. Some outdoor activities include physical exertion, and there may be long periods of exposure to the elements. You will be expected to walk every day and carry your luggage for short distances. The itinerary may include bike riding, climbing steps and trekking. If your itinerary includes community service work of any description, you will be expected to work diligently during this component. Conditions here may be basic with simple accommodation and bathroom facilities. Suitable packing lists will be provided to match the content of the itinerary.

### Accommodation

School tours: Student accommodation is on a twin/triple share basis. Teacher accommodation is on a single room basis. Hotels usually hold a 3-star equivalent rating. Separate sleeping areas and bathrooms are provided for boys, girls, and staff members at homestays.

### Transport

Depending on the tour, modes of transport may include modern air-conditioned private coach, boat, train, plane.

### Your Tour Leader

A tour leader accompanies all group tours. Your tour leader is the person who most influences the success of your trip. They have been meticulously trained and are very experienced in running tours. Every tour leader is locally employed, therefore they are the best person to showcase their country and culture. Their expertise and knowledge creates an insightful and authentic experience of the region. They are with you throughout your trip from breakfast time until the group returns to the hotel in the evening. They are contactable 24/7.

For more information on the role of the tour leader, local guides and accompanying teachers, please refer to our website.

### Group Size

School tours: Minimum group size is 16 students with a minimum of 2 staff members.

There are no maximum participant numbers on any tour.

### Service-Learning Programs

The local community instigates all our service-learning programs in response to their genuine needs and goals. Every program is conducted only after careful consultation with local community leaders and authorities.

We assess each program during the consultation process to ensure that it's sustainable, ethical, and empowers local people. Each project is designed to have lasting economic benefits that build wealth within the community – we're not in the business of tokenistic hand-outs.

- **Physical construction projects.** These projects include building, repairing or improving housing, schools, libraries, washroom facilities or other infrastructure and fittings. We also work with communities that require water reservoirs, irrigation systems and animal pens.

As you can imagine, these projects require lots of physical exertion, sweat and some exposure to the elements. Undertaking a construction project involves hiring expert local tradespeople, assistant builders and transport providers. More substantial construction projects require purchasing locally produced materials, hiring cooks and booking local homestay accommodation, all of which inject money into the host community. Fundraising is usually required for these projects.

- **Community engagement programs.** Through our strong relationships with local schools and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), students can help deliver social service and education initiatives within a community. Your students will work in government-run classrooms or vocational training programs to help teach English (by following a lesson plan prepared in advance), help implement health programs, or work alongside local students as they learn small business skills.

For more details about our service-learning programs, please refer to our website.

## Land Trip Cost and Details

Cost per traveller from A\$ 1,700

Based on a minimum of:

16 students & 2 accompanying teachers/staff members.  
*\*Smaller or larger group sizes priced on application*

### Inclusions

- All accommodation, transport, activities, entrance costs and other programs as described in the itinerary
- Professional *Adventure Travel* tour leader throughout the trip & additional specialist guides
- Extensive destination-specific risk management and assessment
- Meals (and drinking water) as listed in the itinerary
- 24-hour **IN COUNTRY** support
- Pre-departure support, briefings and planning meetings
- Tips for tour leaders, local guides & drivers

### Exclusions

- International flights to/from Laos
- Travel Visa costs (if required)
- Cost of Community projects/Service-learning programs \$3300
- Spending money
- Travel insurance

## Contact details

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