

This popular budget travel guide, now in its updated third edition, offers the lowdown on the best bargain-priced international destinations, with sample prices and key attractions.

THE WORLD'S CHEAPEST DESTINATIONS: 21 Countries
Where Your Money is Worth a Fortune - Third Edition

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The World's Cheapest Destinations

*21 Countries Where Your Money is Worth a
Fortune*

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ISBN 978-1-60145-701-1

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Printed in the United States of America.

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2009

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ASIA



Laos

Laos is one of those rare destinations where travelers can still feel like they've beaten the pack. Most of this sparsely populated nation is still wild and undeveloped, with rustic bamboo villages dotting nearly all of the countryside. Vientiane is a capital city that you can bike across in a half-hour, while other Laotian cities are really just sleepy small towns.

Laos has been content to sit quietly in the corner, forsaking the mad rush for tourism and investment dollars pursued by Thailand and Vietnam. Tourism still seems like kind of a hobby here: the Lao Airlines website looks like it was put together by a high school student, circa 1997. Laos has also managed to avoid the international political incidents that plague its neighbors.

The country is picking up the pace, however, especially in terms of facilities for visitors. A few years ago you couldn't find a hotel in the whole country that charged more than \$100 per night. Now there are fancy hotels springing up to please upscale travelers in both

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Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Vang Vieng has become a pure backpacker ghetto and has little of Laos left in it. Otherwise, commercialism is still pretty rare. Apart from loudspeakers blasting communist anthems in the morning in some towns, you're not assaulted by much of anything. Few billboards or in-your-face advertisements for anything are around and there are even fewer touts or scams to avoid.

The countryside scenes are like something straight out of an old explorer's drawing and some areas outside of Vang Vieng are reminiscent of old Chinese paintings, pointy peaks and all. Perhaps best of all, you can observe a country where tourism has not had a huge impact, where everyone hasn't learned to view you as a walking dollar sign—yet. You need to bargain regularly though to avoid getting ripped off: communist countries tend to instill a sense that it's okay to soak the foreigners whenever possible.

There are no huge monuments or “must see” attractions, but the whole city of Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It's a small, pleasant city made for walking and biking, filled with beautiful Buddhist temples and monks galore. There are some interesting side trips from here as well.

The capital city of Vientiane also has its share of temples and a bizarre Buddha sculpture park that's definitely worth experiencing.

Two people can tour the country for \$25-\$35 per day as budget travelers, much less in the villages, where both standards and costs take a dive. The excellent food is a serious willpower test, however, so a little more money will make life more pleasant. Outside the three main tourist areas, it would be hard for a mid-range couple to spend much over \$60-\$80 a day. Spending \$100 per person per day would only be possible if staying at the

fanciest hotels, eating at the most expensive restaurant, and ordering imported French wine with lunch and dinner. If you book yourself on a tour that costs \$350 a day per person (as I've seen advertised), be assured that at least half that money is going to the tour agency.

The Lao currency, the kip, is far from stable and the Thai baht is considered a hard currency. At times their currency has fluctuated up and down 30 percent in the space of a month, so don't blame me if it happens again and some of these prices are off. At around 8,500 kip to the U.S. dollar as this book was being put together, you might want to carry around a calculator and wear pants with big pockets. The largest bill is generally worth six dollars or less. You need to bring ample cash as well, or spend some time hanging out at banks: as hard as it may be to believe this day and age, there are only a handful of ATM facilities in the entire country and the daily limit is restricted to around \$70. The machines frequently run out of cash.

Accommodation:

Throughout Laos, it pays to travel with a partner; there are not all that many single rooms and dorms are almost nonexistent. For a double room, the capital is much more expensive than the rest of the country. While \$8 will get you a dingy hotel with troubled plumbing in Vientiane, it will get you a lovely hotel room with a four-poster bed in other towns. Basic guesthouses start at around \$3 for a double with shared bath. There are plenty of places under \$7 that will provide a private bath with hot water and maybe even throw in maid service and towels. For \$10 and up you'll start getting air conditioning. In the dirt road villages, however, facilities are limited. You might only pay a dollar or two a person, but your guesthouse will charitably be described as

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“spartan.” All over the country, though, choices are opening up all the time. While any old hovel with spare rooms could get business before in Vientiane, now they actually have to clean the place.

At the middle and high ranges, Laos is one of the world’s great bargains. For the price of a budget motel at home, you’ll get something special. Many mid-range properties are atmospheric French Colonial mansions or former royal residences, loaded with amenities for \$25-\$75 per night. Shelling out \$10 more than the standard rate will often put you into a suite.

If you’re paying the equivalent rate of a 4-star airport hotel at home, you should be in a palatial room in an elegant hotel and have people waiting on you hand and foot.

Food & Drink:

It’s not famous, but the food in Laos is fantastic. It has been influenced by Chinese, Thai, French, and Vietnamese, so there are always some interesting combinations of meat, rice, vegetables, and noodles. Even the street food is fresh and delicious—usually some kind of noodle soup. You can always find crusty baguettes. A great meal in a simple restaurant will often come in under \$5 for two people. In Vientiane, you can find similar cheap meals, but you’ll probably be tempted to go up a notch at least once. Here you can get a full-fledged French dinner for two for under \$20, including drinks. The scores of foreign aid workers have definitely upped the level of refinement though and there are plenty of choices where you can easily spend the equivalent of a local worker’s monthly salary if you want.

You can also find some great bakeries, which is a rarity in this part of the world. For the road-weary traveler, a cup of good coffee and a pastry in the morning

can do wonders, especially when your bill is less than two bucks.

The national beer, Beerlao, is thankfully more interesting than its name. It's usually around \$1.50 for a 20-ounce bottle and can sometimes be found on draft for less. Imports are rare and double the price, except for the odd Chinese beer brought down the river.

Lao Lao is a homemade rice liquor that could probably double as motorcycle fuel in a pinch. It's cheap and nasty no matter where you buy it.

Service is laughably bad in restaurants, especially outside the capital. The locals are definitely not into multi-tasking and you'll sometimes have to ask for something three or four times before finally getting it. If you're in a hurry, eat at a street stall. Otherwise, settle in for a leisurely meal, even if you're the only customer in the place.

Transportation:

Travel is primarily by speedboat or barge on the Mekong River, by rickety airplane, or on buses that range from express VIP aircon buses to seats on the back of a pickup truck. None of the options are known for being too comfortable, but the scenery and insight into local culture usually make up for it.

Only half the country's roads are paved, but the main ones get better each year. The mountain road between Luang Prabang and the capital is now relatively smooth sailing. Several buses make this trip each day and if you can spare a few more dollars, it's worth it. The express bus is only about \$1.25 more than the local bus (which is \$10). Pay a shade more for the VIP option (\$13.50) and not only will you be more comfortable, but you'll get there two hours faster—8 hours instead of 10.

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Minivans offer door-to-door service from traveler hotels for a bit more money.

On less traveled routes, however (including the hill tribe areas in the north), expect to bounce around on the back of a converted pick-up truck for hours, breathing in lots of dust. Ironically, prices go up according to time in transit and the scarcity of travelers; the worse the ride, the more it will probably cost you for remote areas.

The two-day slow Mekong barge trip from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang (\$20-\$30) isn't all that comfortable, but it's a highlight for many visitors. A noisy speedboat can do the trip in a day for double the price. People with plenty of time and the will to charter a boat can ride four or five days from Luang Prabang all the way to Vientiane if the water is not too low. You'll see the real river life glide by.

Local flights are quite reasonable, as in \$80 from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Popular routes fill up fast though, so booking ahead is essential.

City buses in the capital cost only 20 cents. Bike rentals everywhere average a buck or two per day. (Many of the Chinese bikes have "Highly Dependable" embossed on the frame, but don't bet on it.) Motorcycle rentals are \$4-\$8 where they are allowed. Bargain for tuk-tuk style taxis, which are generally \$1.50 to \$3 to get where you need to go. Hiring a car and driver is generally far cheaper than renting a car yourself: commonly \$20 to \$35 a day depending on your bargaining skills and the current price of fuel.

You can fly into the capital or arrive at the Thailand/Laos border by bus or train in several places. Crossing from Vietnam is much more expensive, but is another option.

What Else?

- In Luang Prabang you can get a massage and a sauna visit for about \$4.
- Marijuana grows wild all over the country and sells for less than \$3 an ounce. (It's often sold by old ladies in the market, who also change money—one stop shopping!) The police don't seem to be too bothered about it, but technically the penalties can be harsh. Opium has been dealt with more seriously by the government, but is still a staple of blank-staring men in small villages.
- Things to buy: t-shirts with nonsense English on them, baskets, woven and embroidered clothing, and Buddhist amulets.
- If you'd like to stick around for a while, you can rent a house in the capital for under \$200 per month, even less further afield.
- What you can get for a buck or less: a noodle soup lunch for two at a street stall, two cups of coffee, three servings of six-chili papaya salad (som tam), two gigantic pineapples chopped up, four bunches of bananas, two big fruit shakes, bike rental for at least half a day, a tuk-tuk ride across town, a haircut and a shave, a kilo of laundry washed and dried, admission to almost anything. (I have not been able to confirm whether a buck is still the going rate for three grilled rats on a stick...)

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