



Life in the fast lane

Now that a new high-speed train is opening up corners of Laos once served only by buses, how will life change in the laid-back nation where slow travel has always been the norm?

Words **Claire Boobyer**



The sleek-nosed train was wrapped in the red, white and blue of the Lao national flag and sparkled in the sunlight on a spotless platform.

A man dressed in natty turquoise barked orders through a megaphone to keep passengers away from the carriages until the doors glided open. Then a woman wearing a beautiful blue-embroidered *sinh* (a traditional wraparound skirt) and a frangipani flower in her hair greeted me at the door. Another seemed to be taking care of the large luggage inside. So far, so unlike any rail service I'd ever encountered in the West.

The new *Lane Xang* (meaning 'Land of a Million Elephants') train shuttles between Vientiane, capital of Laos, and the China border, tunnelling through epic limestone peaks and over rivers for 422km at a top speed of 160kph. As far as rail travel in Laos goes, it's like looking into the future.

As I stepped aboard, I thought of the explorer Henri Mouhot, who spent 50 days crossing 800km of Laos on the back of an elephant in 1861, and died shortly afterwards. This train would carry me to my first stop at Vang Vieng (130km away) in 66 minutes! Mouhot's wildest dreams could not have imagined such technological strides here, and up until very recently, neither could I.

When I first visited Laos in 2005, just one set of traffic lights ruled Vientiane. I spent my days visiting far-flung corners of this land-locked nation on uncomfortable, mud-splattered buses. This train, which is part of a

larger 1,000km-long China-Laos network that begins over the border in Kunming, not only heralds a new way of seeing Laos but is a true feat of engineering – the mountains in the north are not easily tunnelled. For me, I was curious as to how it would change the way travellers experience this laid-back country.

Before zooming to Vang Vieng, my journey began with not a million elephants but just one. I had dropped by Vientiane's unusual Buddha Park (Xieng Khuan), where huge Buddhist and Hindu statues scatter grounds dotted with the scarlet petals of crown-of-thorns plants. Boun, my guide, beckoned me to approach the life-size statue of a three-headed elephant, a Hindu deity that has

become an important symbol of the country.

"The heads represent the three royal kingdoms of Laos – Vientiane, Champasak and Luang Prabang," Boun told me.

This trio was created after the 1707 AD

break-up of the 354-year-old kingdom of Lane Xang Hom Khao – meaning Land of a Million Elephants and White Parasol. I'd learn more about the royal kingdoms later in Luang Prabang, but I had more recent history to unravel first; one that reminded me why travelling off the beaten track here often comes with its own unique set of problems.

Laos still bears the unfortunate title of 'the most bombed country on Earth'. During the Vietnam War (1955–75), a CIA-supported military strategy conducted a Secret War in Laos – a neutral country at the time. The US flew more than 500,000 missions, ►

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NEED TO KNOW

Getting there & around

There are no direct flights from the UK to Laos. The author flew with Emirates (emirates.com), which flies from London Gatwick to Vientiane/Luang Prabang via Dubai and Bangkok from £1,000 return, taking from 20 hours. Lao Airlines (laoairlines.com) flies to Vientiane and Luang Prabang from Bangkok (main entry hub) from £74 one way.

An app for buying train tickets was launched last December, but you'll need a local phone number to buy them. You can also contact a travel agency, who will charge a small fee but can also organise transport to out-of-town stations.

When to go

The weather in Laos is dry and pleasantly hot between November and April; the wet season runs from May to September. Cost of travel in Laos is inexpensive due to inflation: pre-2020, the Lao kip (LAK) was stable at LAK8,000 to the US dollar; now it's closer to LAK18,000.

Accommodation

Lao Poet Hotel – A tropical-style hideaway in downtown Vientiane with a rooftop pool. *B&B doubles from £68pn*; laopoethotel.com

Riverside Boutique Resort – A peaceful retreat in Vang Vieng with fine views. *B&B doubles from £82pn*; riversidevangvieng.com

Nam Kat Yorla Pa – This beautiful riverside stay near Muang Xai consists of a collection of wooden cabins. *B&B doubles from £64pn*; namkatoryorlapa.com

Le Sen Boutique Hotel – A bijou beauty that lies in the spiritual city of Luang Prabang. *B&B doubles from £88pn*; lesenhotel.com

Sofitel Luang Prabang – Revived French colonial stay in Luang Prabang. *B&B doubles from £313pn*; sofitel-luangprabang.com



Previous spread: AWL; this spread: A.Lemay, AWL; Claire Booibhyer



All that glitters... (clockwise from top) The golden stupa of Vientiane's Pha That Luang is a national symbol in Laos; the statue of the three-headed elephant deity that sits in Xieng Khuan Buddha Park; offerings left at Pha That Luang; Vientiane's Patuxai, a monument to the Lao soldiers who died in the Second World War and the 1949 War of Independence, was built in 1968 using funds donated by the USA to expand the nation's main airport; an attendant for the *Lane Xang* train; scenic rice fields and karst mountains surround Vang Vieng; (previous spread) a night market lines the street outside Wat Ho Pha Bang temple in Luang Prabang





Sculpting history (left) Xieng Khuan Buddha Park features some 200 sculptures of varying shapes and sizes depicting figures from both Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Despite its ancient look, the park was created in 1958 by Luang Pu Bunleua Sulilat, a yogi-priest shaman. Flooding from the Mekong has contributed to the rather dilapidated state of some of the statues, though it only adds to its mystique

dropping over 2 million tonnes of ordnance between 1964 and 1973. The aim? To stop the Communists – the Viet Cong and the People’s Army of Vietnam – using the Ho Chi Minh Trail. During this time, around 80 million of the 260 million cluster bombs dropped on Laos failed to explode on impact; now they remain a constant threat to locals.

“One third of the country is still unsafe,” explained Khamchan Phetsouphan, communications officer at the Vientiane visitor centre for COPE, an NGO helping those scarred and maimed by the bombs. “People are still suffering, and about 300 are killed or injured each year.”

Landmine detonators British MAG and UXO Laos are working to cleanse the land, but the terrible toll from these devices became horrifically clear during my time at the centre. It was one of many unexpected discoveries that I made in the capital, knowing that my next rail stop was barely an hour’s journey and I had plenty of time to explore.

I wandered the city with Boun as he unravelled more of its past, including the tragic events of 1828, when the Siamese crossed the Mekong and burnt Vientiane to ashes, destroying centuries of history. The royal palace and many temples were erased, and it was only under the French, who ruled here from 1893 to 1953, that the capital revived.

Today, Vientiane is a city of villages (*bans*) similar to those of London, but with a *wat* (temple) at the heart of each. Here, Buddhism and modernity are entwined. Saffron-robed monks clutched mobile phones as they walked past SUVs mounted on pavements; French villas – once colonial offices – are now dwarfed by glassy high rises.

At the centre of all this was the familiar sight of Pha That Luang, a giant stupa tipped in gold. I’d seen it before, but paused to look closer. It was first built in 1566 but was destroyed during the Siamese attack. The French restored it to its original design; now it’s a symbol of the country – “It’s found on bank notes too,” Boun reminded me.

With time on my hands, we stopped to fuel up at Doi Ka Noi, which is run by chef Noi, the first Lao member of the Slow Food movement. I had first tasted her *oua hua si khai* (pork-stuffed lemongrass) a few years ago; today her stuffed stalks, which resemble lotus buds packed with shallots and sauces, were as delicious as I remembered. Given my lunch tomorrow would be from the catering carriage of the train, I savoured every bite.

The US\$6 billion Laos-China Railway is a joint venture between the two nations, but the majority of the money for it comes from China as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to boost its trade network in Asia and Europe. There is more at stake ►



Town and country (this page; clockwise from top right) A Buddha statue glistens atop Mount Phousi in Luang Prabang; the city's Royal Palace was only built in 1904 and served as the residence of the last kings of Laos until the royal reign ended in 1975; Mr Don prepares a picnic for the trek to Phavie village in Muang Xai; Luang Prabang at sunset; Wat Khili was built in the late 1700s and is known as the 'Temple of the Golden Mountain'; the new *Lane Xang* fast train pulls into the station at Vang Vieng; a blacksmith at work in Phavie; chef Noi's pork-stuffed lemongrass; (right page) gazing at Luang Prabang from the top of Mount Phousi

here than local tourism and cutting down commuter times, but Boun claimed that most Lao passengers were happy with the result. Having said that, one traveller I spoke to, on his way to visit family, was less convinced.

“Everyone is worried about the national debt. Laos was heavily in debt to China before this, and people think China will take over the country and buy all the land and businesses.”

The rest of the passengers I spoke to were simply impressed by the speed of the train. A journey that once took five hours by road now takes a fifth of that. It has been popular too. Some 1.3 million passengers travelled this route between its launch and the end of 2022.

My journey was certainly comfier than on the old buses. Air-conditioned carriages offer larger seats in first class than in second, and each wagon has ultra-clean loos (one squat, one sit-down). Sadly, the catering car didn't deliver on its promise; water or Pepsi were the only options. I passed on both, preferring to savour a fish dinner at the Riverside Boutique Resort on my arrival in Vang Vieng.

This lovely hotel hugs the town's pea-green Song River. Its swimming pool and garden of frangipani overlook soaring limestone towers ringed by clouds, which almost give the appearance of mountain peaks dressed in Elizabethan-style ruffs. I decided to settle in for the night, relishing the novelty of not being stiff from a long cross-country bus ride.

The following morning, I bicycled past buffalos mooching in fields to a blue lagoon and climbed high to a cave sheltering a Buddha statue. Then it was time to put my feet up. I boarded a long-tailed boat down the river, which was busy with shrimp collectors and children splashing in the shallows.

For travellers, this is what makes the new fast train so exciting: the chance to spend more time in places that were once quick detours. Recharged, I was keen to travel on to Muang Xai, forging deeper into the mountains. From my window seat, I glimpsed rice storage huts marooned in terraced fields as we zoomed north. Yet, for all its convenience, I was eager to leave my comfortable train behind and get out into the countryside.

With my trekking guide, Mr Don, we dropped by Muang La market to pick up picnic sausages, pig-brain pâté and moreish purple sticky rice enmeshed with coconut and sugar, before driving to the start of our trek. We walked along the Huoai Khai stream bed to Phavie, an isolated Khmu minority village high in the sun-stroked mountains. In the 1930s, opium grown here funded French colonial rule, and it's said that silver flooded the mountains. Today, villagers mostly grow rice, soyabean, corn, chillies and peanuts.

Bamboo and indigo bushes stooped over the bank as we criss-crossed the tinkling water

“Bamboo and indigo bushes stooped over the bank as we criss-crossed the tinkling water on stepping stones”

on stepping stones. The sky was cobalt blue, dusted with cotton-ball clouds. I inhaled lungfuls of fresh air and gazed up ahead.

Beneath the deep folds of a mountain, Phavie's mix of stilted huts and newly built concrete homes sat in a clearing. We'd arrived the morning after a wedding; beer crates were stacked high and chillies dried in the sun.

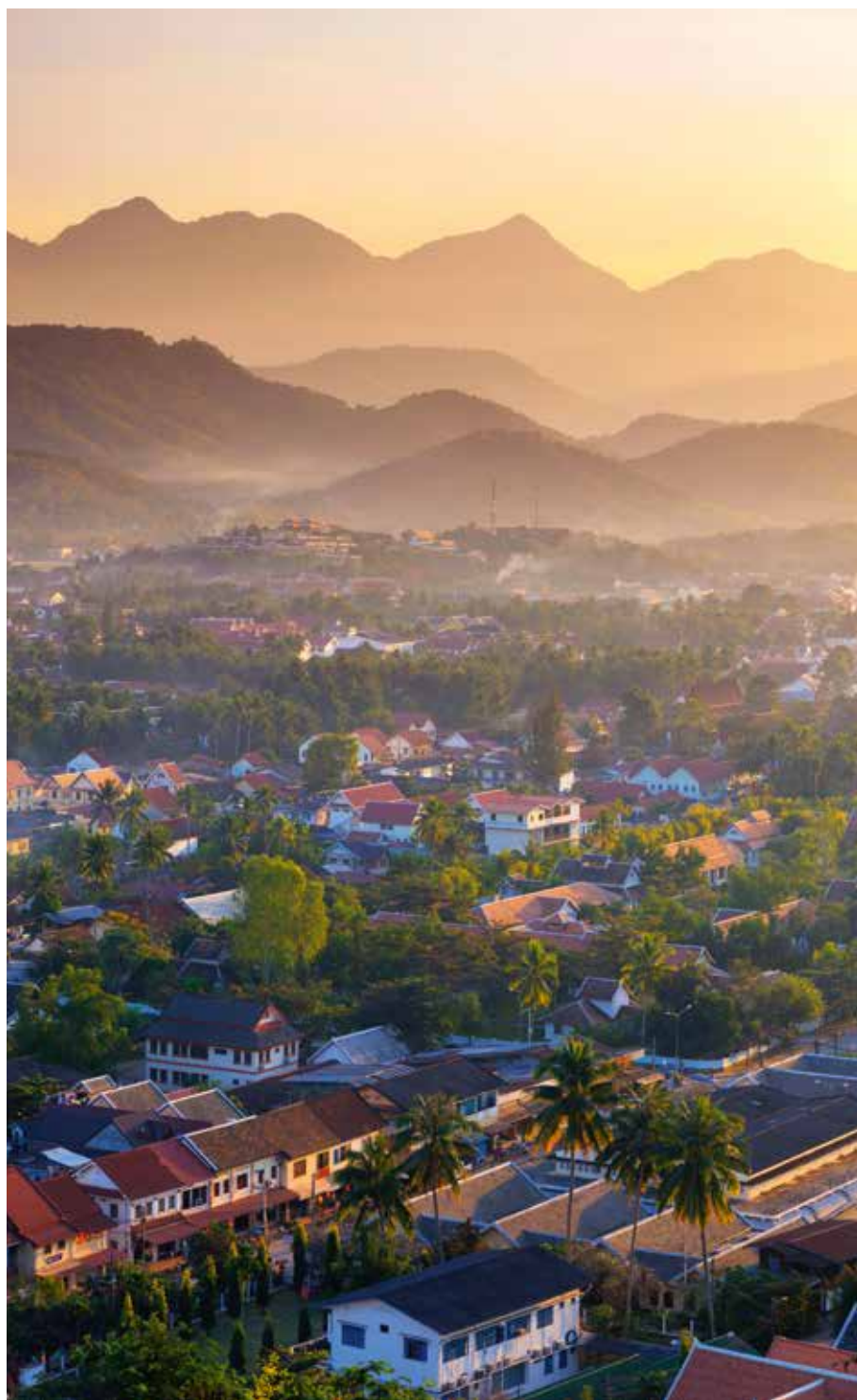
“The Khmu lived here 1,000 years before the Lao came,” explained Mr Don. “They

believe in the spirits of ancestors and offer rice to an altar inside their homes. They had also just held a Baci ceremony, as someone had recently recovered from ill health.”

The ceremony is an animist tradition, I learned, aimed at restoring the 32 spirits to the body to create harmony. Mr Don pointed to the tell-tale signs of a blessing: the wearing of cotton bracelets that signify good luck.

By now, my feet were in need of a blessing. Instead, I sat on a terrace overlooking the river at my jungle retreat, Nam Kat Yorla Pa, with a refreshing Beer Lao. After nights in the cooler mountain air, I looked forward to the tropical warmth of Luang Prabang.

Back on the train, I was joined by Tongdam, a soldier on ten-day leave to see his family. He echoed the sentiments of most ▶





Enjoying the quiet life (above) Luang Prabang has long been the spiritual capital of Laos, and is home to over 30 temples of varying degrees of gilt splendour. It has often felt like a place out of time, an impression helped by how tricky it has always been to reach due to the country's previously poor infrastructure, but this all might change now that the fast train connects it to Vientiane with ease; (right page) the elephant Mae Lam is joined by her mahout at Mandalao, which takes care of elephants that have spent the majority of their lives working in logging camps and tourist attractions with no one to oversee their welfare

people about the train: “It’s nice and easy, and quicker and more comfortable than the bus!”

His words proved true, and we swiftly pulled into Luang Prabang, a city whose Buddhist soul, old royal mantle and French and Lao buildings make it eternally alluring. I strolled palm-shaded, herringbone brick pathways scented with frangipani, visited ethereal temples and sipped coffee and cocktails. At dusk, temple drumming boomed through town; this was my cue to watch the sun set from the terrace of the Belle Rive Hotel. As the sky turned a pale rose, the Mekong crinkled with a silvery sheen and lights from boats spilt glitter over the rippling water.

In the Royal Palace, now a museum, the gable featured the image of the elephants of the three kingdoms, as did the wooden bed of the last king of Laos. Even in the coronation room, red and gold walls sparkled with the

mosaic figures of pachyderms. I felt as if I was spinning in front of a giant disco ball.

Before leaving Laos, I squeezed in one last elephant encounter on a visit to the Mandalao sanctuary near Luang Prabang. I walked with two female jumbos in a teak forest and learnt that only a dwindling 300 or so remain in the wild here. There is hope, though. Mandalao is home to a male adolescent, and the plan is to re-introduce him to the wild to breed.

As we plodded along, I thought of all the gains made here since elephants were used to get around. Laos has always been one of those places where slow travel was unavoidable; that was its charm. The fast train changes that, but not in the way that you’d think. It opens up corners and detours previously too time-consuming to experience; if anything, it lets you slow down more, which can only benefit places like Mandalao and its elephants. **W**



5 FURTHER LAOS HIGHLIGHTS

1 **Champasak and the 4,000 islands**

Explore Champasak, which lies on the banks of the Mekong River, close to the little-known ruins of Wat Phou, then visit the French-colonial relics and waterfalls of the Mekong’s 4,000 Islands.

2 **Bolaven Plateau**

This lava plateau in the deep south of Laos is riven with waterfalls, homestays and dozens of tea and coffee farms and cafés to lure travellers to its cooler climes.

3 **Nam Nern River**

Boat the Nam Nern River for an overnight camping trip on the fringes of the Nam Et-Phou Louey protected area. Spot kingfishers, Asian golden cats, eagles and monkeys, then sign up for multi-day treks through the cloud forest of Mount Forever, spending the night in hanging ‘nest’ tents close to a salt lick. namet.org/wp/namnern

4 **Vieng Xai**

Some 20,000 Pathet Lao Communists and their elephants lived and worked underground in caves for ten years during the Secret War. Today, the City of Victory labyrinth is a fascinating underground museum.

5 **Nam Kan National Park**

Hear black crested gibbons sing – like a kind of underwater warble – from the treehouses of Bokeo forest in Nam Kan National Park after ziplining deep into the forest. gibbonexperience.org

The author travelled with **InsideAsia** (0117 244 3380; insideasiatours.com) on its ten-night *Laos by Rail* trip, costing from £2,051pp (excl international flights). The trip includes all accommodation, breakfasts, a number of meals, train tickets and transfers from Vientiane to Luang Prabang via Vang Vieng and Muang Xai, plus some private guiding. The trip can be tailored to suit interests and timeframes.