Cultural Considerations
Laos Excursion

Growth International Volunteer Excursions

The Roots of Change
Cultural Considerations Table of Contents

Laos Cultural Considerations ................................................................................................. 3
Laos Language – Key Phrases .................................................................................................. 10
Ethnic Groups of Laos ........................................................................................................... 11
  Tai-Kadai ............................................................................................................................... 11
  Austro – Asiatic ....................................................................................................................... 11
  Miao – Yao ............................................................................................................................. 11
  Sino – Tibetan ......................................................................................................................... 12
Laos Cultural Considerations

Lao People’s Democratic Republic is a uniquely charming country of striking natural beauty, cultural intricacies and fascinating history that has been captivating travelers since the communist government opened its borders to tourism as recently as the 1990’s. Laos holds a tangible mystique compared to its more prominent SE Asian neighbors, which are far more heavily influenced by the western world. This political and cultural isolation has played a huge role in Laos’ stunted economic development on one hand, and the perseverance of their traditional values on the other – realizing this contrast is vital to fully understanding this country and its people. GIVE hopes to deliver the most authentic, eye-opening and meaningful Laos experience possible, providing you with the knowledge to respect this one-of-a-kind culture and the opportunities to make a sustainable change in these people’s lives.

Please review the following illustrations for an introduction to Laos culture, courtesy of the GMS Sustainable Tourism Development Project in Lao PDR.

1. The Lao word for hello is “Sa Bai Dee”, usually said with a smile. Touching or showing affection in public will embarrass your hosts.

2. Lao people traditionally greet each other by pressing their palms together to “Nop”, although it is acceptable for men to shake hands.
In Laos your head is "high", your feet "Low". Using your feet for anything other than walking or playing sport is generally considered rude.

Touching someone’s head is very, very impolite.

Lao people appreciate clean and neatly dressed visitors.
Bathing nude in public is impolite.

Please remember to take off your shoes off before you enter a Lao person’s home.

Remember, your head is ‘high’, your feet ‘low’. It is polite to gently crouch down when passing someone who is seated. Never, ever step over someone in your path.
Kissing and hugging in public is impolite. Please be Discrete.

Lao people speak softly and avoid confrontation. Please do not shout or raise your voice.

Before you take a photo of someone ask if it is ok.
Please do not distribute gifts to children as it encourages begging, but give to an established organization or village elders instead.

Try eating delicious Lao food whenever you can, it helps local business and Lao farmers.

Please show respect and dress neatly while in temples and when taking photos.
There are many other sacred items and sites in Laos. Please don’t touch or enter these places without permission.

Monks are revered and respected in Laos, however women should not touch a monk or a monk’s robes.

Please help to keep Laos clean and beautiful by not leaving litter. Picking up rubbish sets a good example for Lao youth.
The illegal sale of wildlife and wildlife products endangers many species native to Laos. Help protect Lao wildlife by refusing to buy wildlife products.

Laos Loses a little of its heritage every time an antique is taken out of the country. Please do not buy antique buddhas or other sacred items. Instead, support local craftsmen by purchasing new, quality handicrafts.

The use of drugs is illegal in Laos. The consequences may be severe for you and Lao society.
Laos Language – Key Phrases

Hello / Goodbye - Sa-bai-Dee.

How are you? - Sa-bai-Dee Baw?

I’m fine, thanks - Dee, Kup-Jai.

Thank you - Kup-Jai.

What is your name? - Jào Suu Nyung?

My name is ____ - Khoy Suu ____.

Where are you from? – Jao maa tae sai?

I’m from ____ - Khuay ma tae ____.

It’s nice to meet you - dee jai thii huu kap jao.

Very Delicious! – Saeb lai lai!

Yes – Maen Leeo

No – Baw

Excuse me / Sorry - Khǎw Thǒht

How much is this? - Anee tor dai?

No worries / You’re welcome - Baw Pen Nyung.

Do you understand? - Khào Jai baw?

I don’t understand – Baw Khào Jai

Goodbye and good luck - Sôhk Dee Deuh!

I love you! – Khoy hak Jào!
Ethnic Groups of Laos

A true mosaic of ethnic groups, Laos has 130 different ethnic tribes divided into four language groups. Some of the tribes may only have a few hundred members and are only found in Laos. These smaller tribes are considered to be in danger of being engulfed by more dominant larger groups. If this happens, then their language and customs will disappear. For those who don’t have any written records, this disappearance can happen very quickly.

Today, there are around six million people spread across 16 provinces. Here is an overview of the distribution of linguistic groups:

**Tai-Kadai** – about 55% of the population
The largest group in Laos consists of people from these tribes - Lao, Phutai, Phouane, Tai Nyo, Tai Deng, Lue, Thai Khao and Thai Dams. Their origins go back several centuries to the conflicts with the Mongols, the Hans and other Chinese groups. They come from the North (Yunnan Province of China) and characteristics include:
- Permanent villages that tend to be larger than those of the other groups
- Traditional housing is made of wood & bamboo on stilts
- Food is based on sticky rice
- Agriculture is based around rice paddy-fields
- Buddhist with a belief in spirits

**Austro – Asiatic** – about 30% of the population
Made up of 47 tribes. Their language is taken from Mon & Khmer. Consists of people from these main tribes - Khamu (Ou, Lu, Rok & Me), Lawen, Taoy, Katang. They came to Laos from the south over 10 centuries ago, characteristics include:
- Houses built on stilts that are shorter than those used by the Tai-Kadai
- No written language
- Religion is animist and shamanist
- Strong community spirit
- Slash & burn agriculture
- Drink rice beer from small earthenware jars

**Miao – Yao** – about 10% of the population.
This linguistic group came from China to the north of Laos between 1815 and 1900. It consists of people from these tribes – Hmong, Yao Mien, Lao Huay (Lenten), Pana Hmong. These largely independent people originate from the high steppes of Tibet, characteristics include:
- Houses built from wooden and bamboo on the ground
- Adoption of the Chinese writing
- Animist religion with worship of ancestors
- Clan unity is very important
- Slash and burn agriculture to cultivate rice, corn and the poppy.
Sino – Tibetan – about 5% of the population.
This linguistic group is essentially formed from the Tibeto-Burman language and is the least developed ethnic group, living only in certain parts of the country. It consists of people from these tribes - Ikhos (Akha), Lahu, Pounoys. The Ikhos came from Yunnan & Tibet at the beginning of the 19th century. The Pounoys were the first tribe to move into Laos, coming from Burma in the 16th century. The Ho people, originally from China were the last to arrive in Laos. Characteristics include:
- Houses built from wood and bamboo on the ground
- No written language
- Complex animist religion based on spirits & souls
- Slash and burn agriculture to cultivate rice & poppies
- Hunter-gatherers