



Jim Sumrall  
333 E. 29th Street  
Durango, CO 81301  
  
(970) 375-9632  
e-mail: [jim@jimsumrall.com](mailto:jim@jimsumrall.com)

## A LAO ADVENTURE, VIENTIANE TO LUANG NAMTHA

Starts: November 2, 2009      Trip Price: \$2,665  
Ends: November 16, 2009      (Fuel surcharge to be added later)  
Capacity: 12  
Leader: Jim Sumrall      E-mail: [jim@jimsumrall.com](mailto:jim@jimsumrall.com)  
333 E. 29<sup>th</sup> Street      Web page: <http://www.jimsumrall.com>  
Durango, CO 81301      telephone: [970] 375-9632

### Highlights

1. Hiking, bicycling, and kayaking in a variety of spectacular settings;
2. Visit World Heritage Site Luang Prabang, and nominated site, the Plain of Jars;
3. Experience Lao National Protected Areas Nam Ha and Phou Khao Khuay.

### What's Included

1. All land and water transportation, and internal domestic flights;
2. Bicycle and kayak rentals, entrance fees to all sites;
3. Bi-lingual guides, all meals, and tips to staff.



[Karsts & River]

### **The Trip:**

Our trip begins with your arrival in Vientiane. Next day we explore the most laid back capital in Southeast Asia and then fly to Luang Namtha on the edge of the Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA) next day. With our local guides we will bicycle, hike, and kayak in the Nam Ha NPA. We spend seven days working our way back to Vientiane, seeing some of the marvelous features of northern Laos, including World Heritage Site Luang Prabang, Pak Ou Caves, the Mekong River, and the enigmatic Plain of Jars. Our final days are spent exploring the Phou Khao Khuay NPA just to the north of Vientiane. This national park is an extraordinary area with mountains and rivers, endangered wildlife and native flora. Our local guide will talk with us about plants and herbs that have been used as traditional medicine.

### **The Country:**

The Lao People's Democratic Republic, formerly the Kingdom of Laos, and historically known as the "Land of a Million Elephants" forms part of the eastern border with Thailand. The Lao people and northern ethnic groups arrived in a series of migrations from Southern China over the past 1500 years. The capital of the first Lao Kingdom (Lan Xang) was established in Xieng Thong and then moved to Luang Prabang during the reign of King Fa Ngum. Under the rule of King Phothisarath, the capital was moved to Vientiane, the current capital. There followed 57 years of peace and prosperity, often called the golden age of Laos, ending with the death of King Suriya Vongsa in 1694. From that time until Laos became a French colony in 1893, its aggressive neighbor to the west, Siam (now Thailand), dominated Laos. Laos' history since French colonization has paralleled that of its neighbors to the east and south, repressive foreign domination, war, and finally independence and self-rule under a Communist regime.

Since emerging from the shadow of decades of war in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Laos has been struggling to establish itself as an economically viable, and culturally stable southeast Asian country. With few natural resources beyond its rivers, forests and people, Laos has been developing what is most valued by its powerful neighbors Thailand and Vietnam. Massive illegal logging operations take place in the eastern part of the country bordering Vietnam. The National Protected Areas of Nam Ha, in the northwestern corner of Laos, and Phou Khao Khuay, near Vientiane, attempt to blend preservation and sustainable use. Here, the villages are encouraged to host and develop tourism, by training local guides, developing eco-tourism, and offering opportunities for adventure, rafting, kayaking, bicycling, and hiking in these relatively pristine locations.

### **Itinerary:**

**Day 1 – Vientiane.** Guests arrive at Vientiane International Airport and transfer to our hotel on your own. Directions to the hotel will be provided to registered trip members. At 6:00PM the group meets for a brief orientation tour and to catch the sunset over the Mekong River with a meal at a riverside restaurant. Overnight hotel.



[Vientiane]

**Day 2 – Vientiane - City Tour.** On our full day city tour, we will visit the national icon That Luang Stupa, the Patuxai victory arch (also commonly referred to as the ‘Vertical runway’), followed by a visit to the national museum. After a buffet lunch of Lao and international cuisine we visit Wat Phra Khaew and Wat Sisaket. We will have some free time in the afternoon and then meet for dinner at one of the many downtown Vientiane restaurants.. Overnight hotel.

**Day 3 – Vientiane to Luang Namtha.** We catch the morning flight to Luang Namtha and check into our comfortable, provincial hotel. We will pick up our bicycles after lunch and spend the afternoon riding the back roads around Luang Namtha. It is mostly level, but roads are unpaved. We may visit a local school, meet villagers, and observe traditional crafts, such as weaving, wine making, basket making. We may even be invited into a local house for tea! Overnight hotel.

**Day 4 – Luang Namtha – Hiking.** Today we will venture into the Nam Ha National Protected Area, hiking to an Akha ethnic village located there. Plan on 6-8 miles over a jungle trail with lunch along the way. Exact destination and route will be determined later; stay tuned! The trail to the Akha village follows a narrow, dirt track used by the villagers to get into town, mostly a gentle uphill climb, with views of the rolling, mountainous landscape. Part of the trail follows a forest road similar to what we might find in our National Forests. Overnight hotel.



[Creek Crossing]

**Day 5 – Luang Namtha – Kayaking.** The day begins with some basic paddling instruction. We will take to our two-person inflatable kayaks in the Nam (River) Tha and float downstream bordering the Nam Ha Protected Area to the confluence with the Nam Ha. The river has some gentle class 3 rapids, but is mostly smooth, wide, and negotiable by the novice kayaker. We will stop along the way visiting Lantan and Kmu villages. Lunch will be along the river and we will return to Luang Namtha by songthiew (small, open trucks commonly used in Laos over rough roads in the interior). Overnight hotel.

**Day 6 – Luang Namtha – Udomxai – Pakbeng.** This will be an early morning and a long drive, with our ultimate destination, Pakbeng on the Mekong River. Along the way we will stop at ethnic villages to view traditional life and the practice of traditional crafts. Lunch, possibly in an Udomxai restaurant, possibly along the road in a local market, depending on our time. Overnight hotel.

**Day 7 – Pakbeng – Luang Prabang.** We board our river boat for a slow day floating down the mighty Mekong River bound for Luang Prabang. Along the way we will stop at ethnic Kmu villages (time permitting) to observe local crafts and activities. We will stop at Pak Ou Caves, the former royal place of worship, containing thousands of Buddha images. We continue down the Mekong reaching Luang Prabang at sunset. Overnight hotel.



[Weaving]

**Day 8 – Luang Prabang.** One could spend days immersed in Lao history and the many cultural sites around Luang Prabang including the Royal Palace museum, which we will visit in the morning; we will purchase tickets (\$10-15) for an optional activity, a performance by the National Lao Dance Theater that takes place in the evening. Luang Prabang has a distinct French colonial feel to it with the many buildings built here during the French occupation, and it is the Buddhist cultural center of Laos, with many teaching Wats, some such as Wat Xieng Thong, Wat Xieng Mouane, and Wat That Chom Sii that we will visit during our day tour. We will try to be at Mount Phousi, across from the Royal Palace Museum, at sunset for the marvelous view from there. We will have lunch and dinner in one of the marvelous local restaurants. Overnight hotel.

**Day 9 – Luang Prabang – Kayaking.** Today we drive north from Luang Prabang to the banks of the Nam Ou. From here we begin paddling in our two-person, inflatable kayaks down stream toward the confluence of the Nam Ou and the Mekong River. The river is wide and calm with only a few riffles to negotiate, suitable for beginning kayakers. We will have a picnic lunch along the way, and there is always the chance for a swim. Late in the afternoon we meet our vehicle and transfer back to Luang Prabang. Overnight hotel.



[Kayaks]

**Day 10 – Luang Prabang – Phonsavan.** This will be another early morning and long drive to the northeastern town of Phonsavan, site of the World Heritage Nominated site 'Plain of Jars'. The 6-7 hour drive (265Km.) takes us over magnificent mountain scenery and through various minority villages before we arrive and check into our hotel. We enjoy a picnic lunch along the way, and break up the journey with several short stops at roadside markets and scenic view points. Overnight guesthouse.

**Day 11 – Phonsavan.** Today we spend a full day visiting the three primary enigmatic archaeological sites located on a vast plain of rolling hills that remains one of the most heavily

bombed regions on earth. It is possible to hike between two of the sites along a well-marked trail spending about 2 hours. We will have a picnic lunch and then continue on by van to the final site. We also visit the village of Xieng Khuang where locals have collected and displayed the remains of Buddha effigies that were destroyed in the intense aerial bombardment of the area that lasted almost a decade. Overnight guesthouse.



**[The Largest Jar]**

**Day 12 – Phonsavan – Vientiane.** We will catch our flight back to Vientiane in the afternoon. If possible (flight schedules change) we will take a morning flight and go on to Phou Khao Khuay National Protected Area in the afternoon. Otherwise, plan on some free time today in both Phonsavan and Vientiane. Overnight hotel.

**Day 13 – Vientiane – Phou Khao Khuay NPA – Hiking.** Today we will spend the day hiking in Phou Khao Khuay National Protected Area. Our day starts with a long-tail boat ride up the Nam Mang, We will reach Tad Xay and Pha Xay (waterfalls in the afternoon. Plan on hiking 3-4 hours today over narrow jungle trails with some ups and downs. These are trails used by the villagers to travel between villages and to the road and town to sell their crafts. If we can arrange it, plan on a home stay in a lowland Lao village, otherwise a local guesthouse. Overnight homestay or guesthouse.

**Day 14 – Return to Vientiane.** This morning we depart Phou Khao Khuay NPA for Vientiane arriving around noon. The rest of the afternoon is free. We reconvene at 6:00PM for our farewell dinner on the banks of the Mekong River, or at another suitably festive restaurant in town. Overnight hotel.

**Day 15 – Vientiane departure.** You are free to schedule your departure for home at any time. Transportation to the airport is by taxi or hotel shuttle. We will be happy to help with arrangements but transfer is own your own. (B)

As with all schedules, things change. We may have to alter the itinerary and/or route and/or sites we visit due to circumstances beyond our control. Our mantra while in Laos is "we are patient, we are flexible."

### **Getting There:**

Our trip begins with your arrival in Vientiane, Laos, and your transfer to our downtown hotel. You will need to get your Lao visa in advance; as of this writing, a single-entry visa costs \$30. Allow yourself plenty of time to get the visa, and be sure your passport is good for at least 6 months beyond the conclusion of our trip. You are welcome to make your own travel plans to and from Laos, or you may want to coordinate your flight with other trip members through a San Francisco Bay Area travel agent the Sierra Club has used for many years. Routing from the U.S. involves flying into Bangkok or another south Asian city and transferring to a flight to Vientiane. Your trip leader will provide details to registered trip members.

## **Accommodations and Food:**

We will generally be staying in tourist class hotels. Accommodations are basic, but clean. Where they are available, we will have rooms with private baths, but in some places, bathrooms may be shared. Showers and hot water may not always be available, so be sure to take advantage of them when they are.

Meals are included in the trip price. Generally, breakfasts are a buffet in the hotel, and lunches we will order as a group. Generally, this will be the 'menu-of-the-day', but on some days we will have a picnic or box lunch prepared for us in advance. Dinners generally will be more leisurely; we can eat as a group, but you will be free to find that special little place to be away from the crowd, giving you the opportunity to experiment a bit with the local cuisine. A wide range of foods will be available, but the staple in Laos is rice, so expect that with most meals. Lao dishes are especially spicy, but they generally "tune them down" for foreigners. Vegetarians should have no trouble finding palatable dishes. If you have special dietary needs we can probably accommodate them provided you notify your leader early.

Water is especially important for your health while traveling in southeast Asia. Bottled water is available for purchase in villages and cities, but the discarded bottles produce a waste problem. Please bring a refillable water bottle and we will try to obtain bulk filtered water for the group. Our concessionaire in Laos will provide a limited amount of bottled water in the vans and hotels, but you should be prepared to meet your own needs. Water purification tablets (chlorine or iodine) or iodine tincture are the surest method, but some find the iodine taste less than palatable. You can also bring a backpackers water filter. Your trip leader has used a filter for years on his overseas trips and remained healthy the entire time.



[Peppers]

## **Trip Difficulty**

This trip is not difficult and is suitable for anyone in reasonably good condition. However, we will be traveling over some rough roads and spending time in kayaks, on bicycles, and on foot, so be prepared for some long, tiring days. You need not be an experienced water person, although knowing how to swim is probably a requirement. All kayaking will be on relatively calm rivers (gentle class 3 rapids the max) accompanied by experienced guides. We will be doing some hiking, so be prepared to cover several miles with modest ups and downs. Our longest hiking day will be about 6-7 hours. Good conditioning will help with your enjoyment of this trip, as will comfortable clothes, good walking shoes, a sense of humor, and patience.

## **Health**

There will be no trip physician, but your leader holds a current WEMT certification from the Wilderness Medical Institute. While our group will carry emergency medical supplies, you must bring a basic, personal first aid kit and whatever personal medications you need. Your reservation confirmation packet contains a medical form that must be filled out and submitted to

the leader before you are accepted on the trip. When completing the medical form, realize that your safety -- and the group's -- depends on candid responses.

## **Equipment**

Suitable equipment is a must, including good rain gear. You should expect to bring a day pack, large enough to carry an overnight supply of clothes (sleeping bag and pad not required), a personal first aid kit, your rain gear and any other gear you may wish to carry (cameras, etc.). Sturdy, comfortable walking shoes are a must. You will want to bring water shoes, and possibly a dry bag. A comprehensive equipment list will be sent to registered trip participants.

## **References**

### **Books**

- Fadiman, Anne, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*.
- King, Ben F., *A Field Guide to the Birds of Southeast Asia, Covering Burma, Malaya, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Hong Kong*
- Robbins, Christopher. *The Ravens, Pilots of the Secret War of Laos*. Asia Books, Bangkok, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2000. (Originally published by Bantam Books, London, 1988).
- Robson, Craig, *A Guide to the Birds of Southeast Asia*
- Scott, Joanna C., *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam*
- Stuart-Fox, Martin, *A History of Laos*
- *The Rough Guide to Southeast Asia*
- *The Lonely Planet Guide to Laos*
- *The Lonely Planet Southeast Asia Phrasebook*

### **Periodicals**

- White, Peter T., "Laos Today," *National Geographic*, June 1987
- O'Neill, Thomas, "The Mekong: A Haunted River's Season of Peace," *National Geographic*, February 1993

### **Maps**

- *The Lonely Planet Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia Road Atlas*
- *Rough Guide Map, Vietnam, Cambodia & Laos, 1:1,200,000*.

### **Conservation:**

Due to its immense population growth, subsistence farming practices, and a focus on industrial development, Southeast Asia faces a number of environmental challenges. The ever-increasing demand for food, power, and lumber has imposed a staggering burden on the land to grow more crops, support more livestock, and yield more fuel and building materials. Many of the region's cities suffer severe air pollution, a growing problem due to increased use of motor vehicles. The rivers and waterways, too, are heavily polluted in many places. Deforestation, though, is perhaps the most difficult problem facing Southeast Asia. Slash-and-burn agriculture has led to a loss of natural forest cover, and the cultivation of grasslands has greatly increased the erosion of topsoil along, for example, the Mekong River which borders and runs through much of Laos.

Authorities have begun to act, however, and the establishment of National Protected Areas in Laos is an effort to develop an alternative industry that uses its forests in a sustainable manner.

We will observe, firsthand, the long-range effects of overpopulation and dwindling resources. but we will also see some of the innovative ways Southeast Asians are attempting to slow deforestation, improve air quality, and clean up its rivers and waterways. We will have the opportunity to compare and contrast our experiences in Southeast Asia with the same



**[Akha Village]**

conservation issues we face in our home states. We will also be visiting two National Protected Areas, Luang Nam Ha and Phou Khao Khuay. The Lao government is actively experimenting with various approaches to manage its natural resources, and the National Protected Area is one approach. If we can arrange it, we will be meeting with park officials in both NPAs to learn more about the NPA approach.

### **Trip Price**

This trip requires a \$200 per-person deposit. An additional payment of \$300 per person is due six months prior to trip departure. International trip prices are subject to change and are based on double-occupancy. Single rooms may not be available or may cost more than the listed price. If you have any questions regarding double occupancy, please contact [the trip leader](#).

See the [How to Apply for an Outing](#) section for more details on registering for this trip and details about our [Reservation and Cancellation Policy](#).

The payment of a deposit does not confirm you as a member on the trip. Participants must be approved by the trip leader. After signing up for this trip, you will be sent a confirmation packet containing approval materials (Participant Approval Questionnaire, Medical Form, Liability Release Form). Each applicant (including those on the waitlist) must fill out these forms and promptly mail them to the trip leader. The leader will review the approval materials and notify you of your acceptance in a timely manner.

Virtually all of your costs are included in the trip price, from your arrival in Vientiane until your departure. All meals, lodging, entrance fees, guides, tips to staff, and equipment rentals are included. Note that your trip price does include the cost of our internal flight from Vientiane to Luang Namtha and back to Vientiane from Phonsavan. All ground and water transportation while on our trip is also included.

**Not included:** Transfers to and from the airport in Vientiane, the cost of your passport, Laos visa (\$30 as of this writing), and Laos departure tax (\$10 at this writing); international air travel between your home and Laos; laundry; and bottled beverages.

### **Staff:**

Jim Sumrall has been a Sierra Club outings leader since 1997. He has led Sierra Club trips in Nepal, Southeast Asia (Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia), Latin America, Germany, Austria,

the Czech Republic, and, domestically, in Colorado and New Mexico. He has traveled the United States, much of Canada, and South America, and visited New Zealand and the Philippines as well. Jim works summers as a Wilderness Ranger in the Weminuche Wilderness Area in the San Juan National Forest, winters on Ski Patrol at Purgatory Ski Area, and has volunteered with the San Juan Mountains Association as a wilderness information specialist, and with the Southwest Colorado chapter of the American Red Cross as a CPR, First Aid, and Wilderness First Aid instructor. He currently holds a WEMT from NOLS/Wilderness Medicine Institute.

**[Jim in Laos]**



Jim grew up in the Denver area and lived in Boston and Cambridge for 20 years before returning to the West in 1990 for a job in Arizona. After semi-retiring in 2000, Jim moved to Durango, Colorado, where he enjoys backpacking, backcountry skiing, mountaineering, and other outdoor activities. His [website](#) features trip journals and photographs from prior Sierra Club trips. Jim's e-mail address is [jim.sumrall@rmc.sierraclub.org](mailto:jim.sumrall@rmc.sierraclub.org).