



Laos 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Burglary; Fraud; Rape/Sexual Violence; Assault; Rebellions; Improvised Explosive Device; Insurgencies; Aviation; Bombing; Faith-based Organization; Religious Violence; Floods; Surveillance; Drug Trafficking

East Asia & Pacific > Laos; East Asia & Pacific > Laos > Vientiane

7/12/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: High

Crime Threats

Vientiane is a relatively safe city in comparison to most cities of comparable size in the U.S. American visitors are generally safe and are not singled out or targeted based on nationality; however, foreigners are frequently targeted for crimes of opportunity. Crime committed against foreigners is usually non-confrontational and primarily consists of purse snatchings, pickpocketing, and thefts of unattended property (purses/shopping bags). RSO has seen a dramatic increase in purse snatchings, which includes perpetrators on motorcycles. Pickpockets and petty criminals are particularly active around transportation hubs.

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Crimes against property include residential break-ins, predominantly in homes with poor security (accessible windows, unlocked doors, not staffed by a guard) and theft from vehicles that have valuables left visible.

A common crime in the tourist areas is for shop owners to rent motorbikes to tourists, then have someone “steal” the motorbike, and charge the tourist for the cost of the “stolen” motorbike.

Although rare, there has been an increase in violent crimes and crimes involving the use of weapons, which include firearms. A number of rapes and assaults have occurred in 2015, a few were reported involving Westerners.

Other Areas of Concern

While the past several years have remained relatively quiet and stable in most areas, in 2015, RSO received a number of reports involving shootings, fire fights, and makeshift road-side bombs in remote areas. The Xaysomboun province, in particular, has been of particular concern. In December 2015, a number of violent clashes between Lao military and police officials and an unnamed group(s) of dissidents resulted in a number of injuries and deaths from small-arms fire and crude improvised explosive devices (IEDs). As a result, the U.S. Embassy has restricted all movement of U.S. government personnel in Xaysomboun and issued a Security Message to U.S. Citizens advising American citizens of the restrictions.

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The large amount of unexploded ordnance (UXO) left over from the Indochina War caused approximately 50 casualties in 2015. UXO can be found in some parts of Savannakhet, Xieng Khouang, Saravane, Khammouane, Sekong, Champassak, Houaphan, Attapeu, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane provinces. In addition, numerous mine fields are left over from the Indochina War along Route 7 (from Route 13 to the Vietnam border), Route 9 (Savannakhet to the Vietnam border), and Route 20 (Pakse to Saravane). Never pick up unknown metal objects and avoid traveling off well-used roads, tracks, and paths.

You should exercise caution in remote areas along the border with Burma. Bandits, drug traffickers, and other people pursuing illegal activities operate in these border areas, as do armed insurgent groups opposed to the government of Burma.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road accidents have become a major cause of death and serious injury. Police continue to identify intoxication and other forms of dangerous driving for the high accident and fatality rates. In 2015, 5,571 road accidents were recorded, killing 995 people.

Defensive driving is imperative; many drivers pay little attention to traffic laws. With the increase in the number of cars on the roads, congestion is on the rise. Traffic is chaotic, and road conditions are very rough. Few roads have lane markings. Where lane markings, road signs, and stoplights do exist, they are widely ignored. Many drivers are underage,

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unlicensed, inexperienced, and uninsured. Driving under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs is not uncommon. Theoretically, traffic moves on the right, but vehicles use all parts of the road. Motorcyclists pay little/no heed to cars. Motorcycles carry as many as five people, greatly impeding the drivers' ability to react to traffic. The evening hours are particularly dangerous. Road construction sites are poorly marked, appear with no advance warning, and can be difficult to see at night. Roads are poorly illuminated, many vehicles have no operating lights, few bicycles have reflectors, and trucks without reflectors commonly park on unlighted roads. Exercise caution on the roads, and be sure to check with local authorities, transport companies, other travelers, and/or the Embassy regarding road developments prior to travel. Road obstacles, such as changes in surface conditions due to the weather, occur frequently.

Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation is unreliable and is limited after sunset. Taxis or cars-for-hire are available at the airport, the Friendship Bridge, most major hotels, and near the Morning Market in Vientiane. The most common form of public transport is a three-wheeled, open-sided taxi called "tuk-tuks." Tuk-tuks and taxis are frequently in poor repair, and drivers generally speak little/no English. Inter-city transport is provided by buses, vans, pickups, and trucks, any of which may also be in poor repair.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

In 2013, a Lao Airlines flight crashed, killing all 49 people aboard, while trying to land in bad weather in southern Laos.

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In 2015, a Lao Skyway aircraft went off the runway after landing at Vientiane Airport in clear weather conditions. There was major damage to the aircraft but no reported injuries.

Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

The threat of transnational terrorism is generally considered lower than in surrounding countries, and there is no information to indicate specific, credible threats against U.S. citizens or interests. It remains possible that transnational terrorist operatives not identified by U.S. intelligence or law enforcement – or travelling with fraudulent documents -- could transit Laos, as its borders remain relatively porous.

Between February 2003-November 2004, there were bombings in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and other cities and provinces, including Xieng Khouang, Sayabury, Houaphan, and Saysamboun. Between February-April 2003, armed attacks on buses and other vehicles on Routes 13 (Vang Vieng to Luang Prabang) and Route 7 (Junction 12 to Phonsavan) killed at least 22 people. Small bombings and attacks on remote roads, as well as other incidents, have been reported. There is no indication that these events were related to international

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terrorist groups, but the threat of international terrorism is not without precedent, and visitors should exercise caution.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

The political situation is relatively stable. Several small bombings occurred in years past in Vientiane; however, none directly targeted Western interests/people. Perpetrators of these bombing incidents appear to have been a mix of local and expatriate Lao dissatisfied with the government. No incidents have occurred in the last several years.

Post Political Violence Rating: Low

Religious/Ethnic Violence

There were reports of religious and ethnic violence in 2015. Despite efforts by the central government to enforce laws/policies protecting religious freedom, district and local authorities in some provinces continued to be suspicious of non-Buddhist or non-animist religious groups and occasionally displayed intolerance for minority religious groups, particularly Protestant groups. Restrictions on minority religions remained disproportionately high in certain provinces. There were reports of attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, detentions, arrests, and the killing of a religious leader under unexplained circumstances.

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Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

As a landlocked country, Laos has not fallen victim to the natural disasters witnessed in recent years elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The most significant threat is the potential for flooding in the Mekong River Basin. The majority of the population base lives in the river basin and is affected by any significant river flooding.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

Laws regarding intellectual property do not exist; however, the means to create fraudulent products is low. Most IP theft comes from neighboring countries.

Privacy Concerns

Security personnel may place foreign visitors under surveillance. Hotel rooms, telephones, and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched.

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Drug-related Crimes

The presence of methamphetamine and amphetamine-type substances (ATS) witnessed a marked upsurge in recent years. Cross-border illicit trade is increasing, and a commensurate increase in addiction and associated criminality has been observed. There were a number of reported drug overdoses in 2015.

Some tourists have had drinks or food spiked with drugs. Be aware that some restaurants in popular tourist destinations offer drug-laced food and drink that has led to victims being assaulted. Consuming these products can result in serious injury or even death.

Kidnapping Threat

In 2012, an internationally-acclaimed community development worker and prominent member of Lao civil society was abducted and has not been heard from since.

Police Response

Local law enforcement response to crimes, even violent crimes, is often limited. Foreigners attempting to report crimes have reported finding police stations closed, emergency telephone

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numbers unanswered, or policemen lacking transportation or authorization to investigate crimes that occur at night. Although officers are polite, few speak English, and most will not react without a formal authorization from their supervisory officers.

Police have set up random check points, imposed occasional curfews, and maintained static posts, all of which has helped deter some crime.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

If you are arrested, you may request that the authorities alert the Embassy in Vientiane of your arrest and to have communications from you forwarded to the Embassy. If you are allowed to call the Embassy, you can call during duty hours or call the duty officer after hours and on weekends and holidays.

Crime Victim Assistance

An American citizen requiring police assistance during non-working hours should contact the Embassy duty officer. The local emergency lines are: 190 for fire, 191 for traffic police, and 195 for ambulance. The Tourist Police can be reached in Vientiane at 021-251-128.

Medical Emergencies

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Medical facilities and services are limited and do not meet Western standards.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

The Department of State assumes no responsibility for the professional ability or reputation of the following hospitals:

In Vientiane, U.S. citizens may wish to contact the French Clinic (Centre Medical de L'Ambassade de France (CMAF)), which is supported by the French Embassy.

Khou Vieng Road across the street from the Green Park Hotel

Tel. 856-21-214-150 or 856-20-5558-4617

The Australian government also supports a fee-for-service clinic at the Australian Embassy.

Kilometer 4 on Thadeua Road

Tel. 856-21-353-840

Both facilities have well-trained physicians who can handle routine and urgent health problems and provide travel medicine services.

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The Alliance Clinic, operated by the Wattana Hospital group from Thailand, has basic clinical services provided by Thai physicians and is in the Honda building near the airport.

U.S. citizens often seek medical care in Thailand. The Friendship Bridge linking Vientiane, Laos, to Nong Khai, Thailand, is open daily 0600-2200. Officials generally will allow travelers to cross after hours in cases of medical emergency.

Ambulances for both AEK Udon International Hospital and Nong Khai Wattana Hospital have permission to cross the Friendship Bridge to collect patients from Vientiane.

In Vientiane, the Setthatirat Hospital ambulance (tel: 021-413-720) can take patients to Thailand.

Bangkok Hospital: 111 Thong-yai Road, Mak-Khaeng Sub-district, Muang District, Udon Thani 41000 tel: 042 343-111

Available Air Ambulance Services

Lao Skyways: 856-20-5550-2399

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

For vaccine and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:

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<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/laos>.

OSAC Country Council Information

An OSAC Country Council was established in Laos. The Country Council is co-chaired by RSO Nathan Kim and Eric Seastedt. The Country Council meets quarterly at the U.S. Embassy and can be contacted at OSACLaos@state.gov. To reach OSAC's East Asia Pacific team, please email OSACEAP@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

The Embassy is located at: Thadeua Road, Kilometer 9, Vientiane, Laos.

Hours of Operation: 8:00 AM-5:00 PM, Mon-Fri, excluding local and American holidays.

Embassy Contact Numbers

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Switchboard: 856-21-487-000

Fax: 856-21-487-190

Duty Officer (Afterhours): 856-20-5550-2016

Regional Security Office: 856-21-487-116

American Citizen Services Section: 856-21-487-000

Consular Email: conslao@state.gov

Website: <http://laos.usembassy.gov>

Embassy Guidance

Please take the time to tell the Embassy about your presence. If you enroll, the Embassy can keep you up-to-date with important safety and security announcements. It will also help your friends and family get in touch with you in an emergency. You can register in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program at <https://step.state.gov>.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Situational Awareness Best Practices

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Visitors should remain vigilant with regard to their personal security. Be cognizant of your surroundings. Know where you need to go and walk with a purpose. Do not give the impression that you are lost or wandering. There is evidence that criminals will observe these vulnerabilities and target these types of individuals. Be attentive to your surroundings and keep control of your personal items while on public transit. While waiting in line, keep your luggage close. Parents should tell children before the trip that their cooperation will be helpful at airports to help ensure everyone's safety and ease of travel. Families become a prime target if the children are uncooperative and attention is focused on controlling them.

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