

GO WILD

With a wealth of natural beauty and traditional culture, Laos, Southeast Asia's untrammelled ecotourism gem, beckons intrepid travellers

WORDS & PHOTOS DAVE STAMBOULIS

With less than seven million people, Laos has Asia's lowest population density – great news for those looking to get off the beaten track and vacation amid nature. Much of the country is made up of mountains and dense jungle, and if you throw in traditional ethnic minority cultures, plus access that usually requires walking, kayaking, or some sort of travel under one's own steam – you'll be up for an enlightening, eco-friendly adventure. Here are some of the best options.

VANG VIENG

Why go: Set in unbeatable locale, Vang Vieng is a small village tucked at the base of towering limestone karst peaks through which the sleepy Nam Song River languidly flows. While the area was marred by fatalities during a backpacker full-moon party

scene some years back, the Lao government has since stepped in and turned Vang Vieng into a more upscale destination, with boutique stays, hot air balloon rides, and no more river bars and loud music.

Check out: Its backcountry of hidden caves, turquoise freshwater swimming holes, and bumpy dirt roads is perfect for getting lost in on bicycles. It's beautiful and hosts only a fraction of visitors that were here before.

Where to start: While much of Vang Vieng is suitable for a do-it-yourself tour – with bicycle rentals available everywhere and decent maps to guide you out to the swimming holes and main caves – ecotourism operator Green Discovery can get you further afield, by combining kayaking adventures on the Nam Song with trekking trips up to mountain spots few tourists get to see.

Dusk falls on the Nam Ha River, Luang Nam Tha



Facing page, from top: Relaxing after a hard trek in Vang Vieng's beautiful Blue Lagoon; Khmu woman labouring in the rice fields with her homemade bamboo basket

This page, clockwise from top left: Traditional Akha headdresses adorned with antique silver coins from France, a legacy of the colonial rule in Indochina; a young Lanten woman carries corn home in her bamboo basket; meals on eco-treks often use items from the jungle such as bamboo and banana leaves for cooking and as receptacles



For adrenaline junkies, local rock guide extraordinaire Sangthong, better known as Adam, leads rock routes up the surrounding karst towers. Sangthong, who runs Adam's Rock Climbing School, has instructed and climbed in Thailand, Germany and France, speaks four languages to boot, and has high hopes that the future of Vang Vieng will involve canyoning, bungee jumping, and sky diving, as the pristine area is ripe for exploration.

Green Discovery Laos,
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greendiscoverylaos.com;
Adam's Rock Climbing School,
+856 20 5501 0832,
laos-climbing.com

LUANG NAM THA

Why go: This is the epicentre and birthplace of Lao ecotourism, with more green tourism projects than anywhere else in the country. Frontier town Luang Nam Tha might not be much to look at on first glance, but it is surrounded by fantastic natural beauty. One prominent eco project is The Nam Ha National Protected Area – over 2,000sqkm of rivers and evergreen highland forest, home to clouded leopards, tigers, and a vast array of unique bird species. Named an ASEAN Heritage site in 2005, it combines dense jungle



cover with hidden waterfalls, and is usually accessed by running kayaks down the Nam Tha River into the park.

Check out: Immerse in traditional village life, as many of the treks pass through ethnic minority villages.

The colourful Akha and Yao live up around Muang Singh on the Chinese border, while the Khmu and Lanten inhabit Nam Ha. The Lanten thrive along the rivers, using the water for their most notable products: the homemade natural indigo-dyed clothing they wear, and bamboo paper they produce. Lanten women can be recognised by their shaven eyebrows, and like the neighbouring Khmu, they continue to lead highly traditional lives,

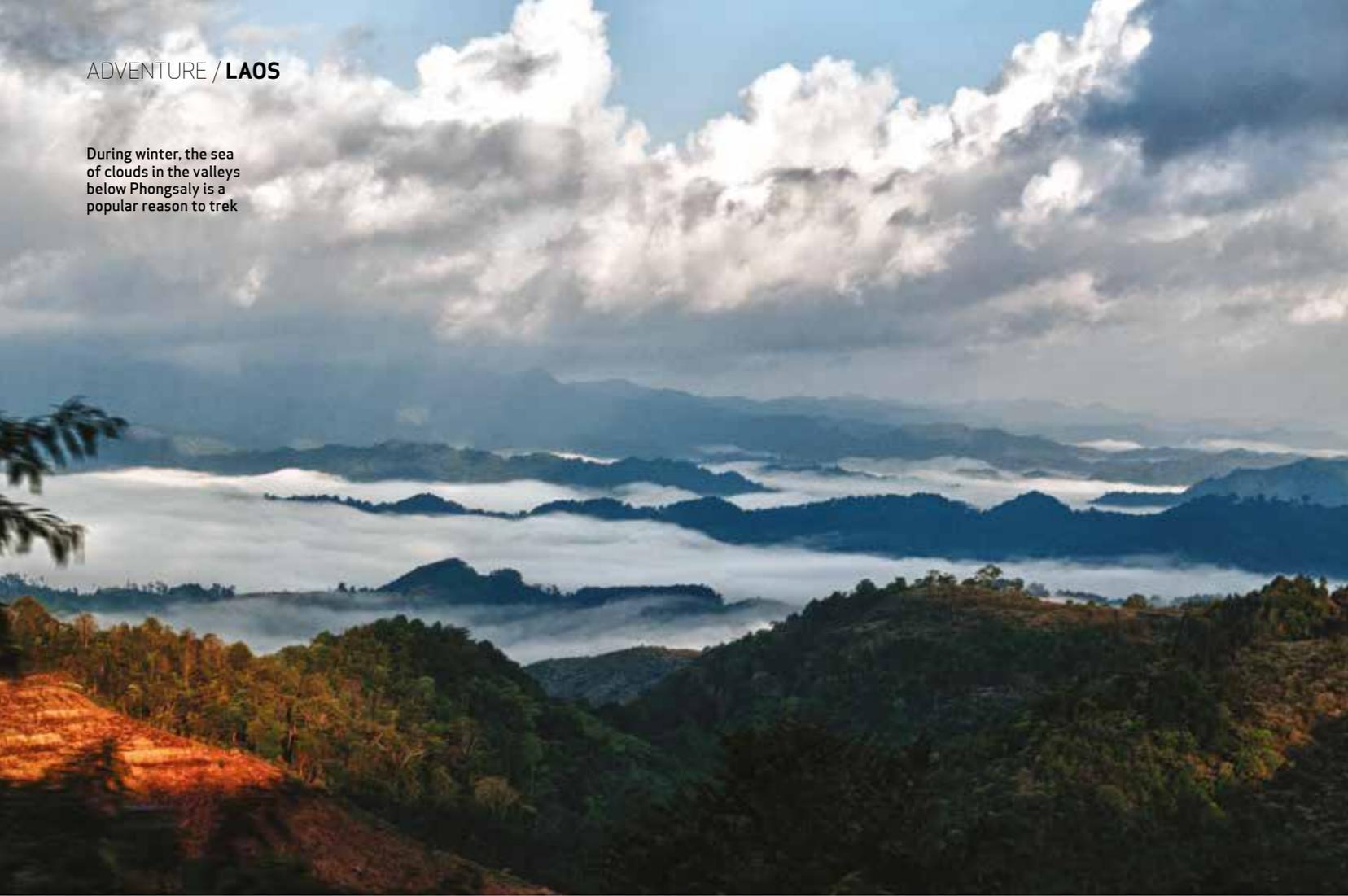
engaging in agriculture by hand and water buffalo, using non-mechanised tools for farming, even relying on traditional shaman medicine men to heal illnesses.

Where to start: Eco stalwarts Green Discovery Laos started their first tour programmes here, and newcomer Forest Retreat also runs treks into the jungle, combo kayak-and-trek adventures, and even some cycling journeys along the few roads that traverse the area. Both operators employ local guides, operate traditional homestays, and support local communities.

Green Discovery Laos,
+856 86 211 484;
The Forest Retreat,
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forestretreatlaos.com



During winter, the sea of clouds in the valleys below Phongsaly is a popular reason to trek



Below, from left: Married women in the Red Yao are identified by the large turbans they wear; rice is husked by traditional mortar

PHONGSALY

Why go: If you want to discover Laos at its most remote, then head to its northernmost reaches, up above the clouds in Phongsaly, perhaps the country's best kept secret. Phongsaly straddles a mountain ridge up at 1,400m, and along its cobblestoned streets,

one is far more likely to hear Phu Noi, Akha or Chinese spoken rather than Lao, as the town is just a few kilometres from China. The highland villages here offer tremendous views, and during the sunny, dry season from November to May, the hanging valleys are usually shrouded in a dense sea

of clouds, making the entire area appear as if it is riding on a magic carpet.

Getting here is an adventure in and of itself, requiring a full day's bus journey on a serpentine mountain road snaking its way through valleys and high peaks. While the former mud and dirt road has been sealed, cutting travel time from 16-17 hours to a mere eight hours from the town of Oudomxay, it is still an arduous sojourn, but well worth the effort to get to some of Laos' finest trekking.

Check out: Small mountain hamlets surround Phongsaly, mainly inhabited by Phu Noi and Akha hill tribes. The Akha – recognisable by the women's unique headdress of trapeze caps covered in ancient French silver coins – still have one foot firmly in their old ways. Other than

satellite dishes and old Nokia phones, life here is far removed from the 21st century – cooking is still done on open hearth stoves with firewood hauled from the forests by baskets woven by hand from bamboo and rattan from the mountain slopes.

Trekking here is quite varied. There are long, remote, and demanding ones, as well as easy one-night adventures with minimal climbing and short walks. Out on the trail, local guides prepare simple but sumptuous meals using bamboo, banana leaves, along with local vegetables, while in the villages, groups usually stay with the headman and his family and are often treated to a local feast.

One highlight of trekking here is that visitors are welcomed with a traditional Akha massage, done by the older women in the village

– a superb way to wind down a day of climbing.

Where to start: While the trekking and tourism scene here is in its infancy, the Phongsaly tourism office runs one- to four-day eco-trekking tours to hill tribe villages, has English speaking staff, and can tailor tours to remote areas. A few other small independent operators in town have also started up to handle the overflow.

Phongsaly Tourism, +856 20 5428 4600, tourismlaos.org

What Laos may lag in fancy spas, glitzy shopping, and urban attractions, it more than makes up by being at the forefront of adventuring in Southeast Asia.

 *SilkAir flies three times weekly between Singapore and Vientiane and Luang Prabang*

From top: Kayaking on the Nam Ha River is a big draw; in remote Phongsaly, water is drawn from the river and carried by bucket into traditional wooden homes



GETTING THERE

• **Vang Vieng:** Buses, minivans, and private taxis make the journey in three to four hours from Vientiane, and six hours from Luang Prabang.

• **Luang Nam Tha:** It takes around eight hours by bus or minivan from Luang Prabang, a bit less by private car. There are also domestic flights from Vientiane.

• **Phongsaly:** There is one bus a day from Oudomxay, which is a four-hour road trip from Luang Prabang. As the journey is rough, it's best to hire a private vehicle.

STAY

• **Vang Vieng:** The Riverside Boutique Resort offers pampering luxury (rooms from USD125) after roughing it on the trails. riversidevangvieng.com

• **Luang Nam Tha:** Set on a river out of town, the Boat Landing is an atmospheric stay (rooms from USD47-55). theboatlanding.laopdr.com

• **Phongsaly:** The Phou Fa Hotel offers the only slightly upmarket digs here, with local guesthouses (USD15-40) being the norm. +856 88 210 031

