

Festivals IN LAOS

The best way to appreciate Laos is simply to unwind with the local people. Laotians value fun, celebration and tradition, so you are likely to encounter a vibrant festival with plenty of warm welcomes whenever and wherever you decide to visit.



Dressed for festival fun.



Text and Photos Antony Barton

Nestled between Thailand and Vietnam, Laos is fast becoming a popular destination for travellers seeking traditional Indochina and a relaxed way of life. This landlocked country may not boast the beautiful beaches of its neighbours, but it does possess forested mountains, picturesque rivers and welcoming villages in abundance. Popular attractions include the thousands of ancient jars that inexplicably cover the northern plains, cave hideouts for the former Communist leadership and elegant temples in the world's most laid-back capital, Vientiane.

Laotians are also incredibly proud of their rich and colourful heritage, with a calendar full of lively, social festivals that delight residents and tourists alike. Here are some of the highlights.



A soldier gets a soaking, delighting onlookers.



NEW YEAR (BUN PI MAI)

While thousands of people flock to Thailand every April for the world-famous Songkran water festival, those travellers who prefer quirkier and longer-lasting New Year's celebrations should cross the border to Luang Prabang.

This beautiful Unesco World Heritage Site is a sleepy town that comes alive with Bun Pi Mai. The fun keeps going for a full seven days, compared with Thailand's three, and nobody is safe from a soaking or rice-flour facial. Children leap from doorways with water pistols, while truckloads of cheery locals tour the streets with buckets to drench unwitting pedestrians.

Water forms a major part of the traditional cleansing ceremony, which includes cleaning the family home, bathing Buddha images and trickling water over elders and monks as a sign of respect. Other traditions include releasing animals for Buddhists to make merit.

The town's festivities also include building sand temples on a nearby river island, with participants finishing their creations with flags, flowers and perfumed water. The Miss Lao New Year beauty pageant is another popular fixture, but the highlight for most people is the street parade. This sees the red-faced spirits Grandfather and Grandmother Nyeu and the dragon Sing Kaew Sing Kham leading dancers, monks and musicians through the streets to a nearby temple.

At the end of the week, the townspeople climb the central hill to make offerings of sticky rice at the summit's stupa. The final public display is the ceremonial transfer of the Pha Bang Buddha figure from a town temple to its usual resting place in the Royal Palace Museum.

A rice-flour facial, trigger-happy tearaway and the spirits of Luang Prabang.





Laotians in national dress, sprinkling water from parade floats.

END OF BUDDHIST LENT (BUN OK PHANSA)

The monks' three-month fast during the rainy season ends in October, and it is marked by crowds of people lining up at dawn to make offerings to the chanting Buddhist faithful. In the evening, candle-light processions wind around temples, and hundreds of colourful floats with flowers and incense are set adrift on the Mekong River as a sign of respect to the water spirit. It is believed that these floats, made from banana tree trunks, carry bad luck away with them.

Fans of the paranormal have a peculiar interest in this festival. This night each year is reportedly the best time to see the "naga fireballs" – unexplained glowing red balls the size of water melons that rise from the Mekong River and reach as high as a couple of hundred metres before disappearing. Thousands are said to have risen in one night alone.

Boat-racing festivals occur across the country to coincide with Bun Ok Phansa, but the most spectacular of these is in Vientiane. Over 20 dragon boats race along the river, with crews coming from across Laos to compete for cash prizes and trophies. Funfair sideshows and food stalls line the route, and riverside spectators bang drums and sing songs to speed along their team.



Monks receive offerings of food.



ELEPHANT FESTIVAL (BUN XANG)

Now in its fifth year, the Elephant Festival is a chance for people to appreciate and understand more about the creature. The three-day event, held each February in Pak Lay, includes an elephant procession with as many as 50 participants and an Elephant of the Year show, with credit awarded for good health, body condition and temperament.

Other events include elephant logging demonstrations and elephant rides, but most attendees are happy just to watch the animals stroll around, bathe and eat. At this year's festival, the Vientiane Circus wowed audiences, monks gave

blessings and citizens from the local province arranged traditional dances, school performances and a fashion show.

Behind all the fun is a drive to raise awareness of the animal's plight, with only around 1,200 elephants remaining in Laos. The festival provides an obligatory health check by festival organisers and livestock veterinarians, and any disorders are treated free of charge. The animals are micro-chipped, health issues are logged and elephant owners are able to seek advice from on-site experts.



A drag queen entertains the crowds.

ROCKET FESTIVAL (BUN BANG FAI)

A contender for Laos' craziest event, Bun Bang Fai is a wild combination of music, folk theatre, drinking and dancing. The merrymaking climaxes with bamboo rockets being fired into the sky as part of an ancient tradition to encourage the heavens to rain on the rice fields.

The festival is held in many Lao regions and some parts of Thailand from the beginning of the rainy season in May. It commences with a religious ceremony and attracts Laotians who are keen to win awards for the best-decorated and highest-travelling rockets.

Phalli are central to the occasion. Some say they are used to encourage fertility, while others claim they are intended to anger the gods and therefore encourage thunderstorms. They now appear as anything from elaborate walking sticks and make-shift umbrellas to props in lewd pantomimes with cross-dressing actors.



The monkey army takes to the streets.