



Laos 2012 Crime and Safety Report

Transportation Security; Stolen items; Floods; Drug Trafficking; Burglary; Bombing

East Asia & Pacific > Laos > Vientiane

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Threats

Vientiane is a relatively safe city in comparison to most cities of comparable size in the United States. Crime committed against foreigners is usually non-confrontational in nature and primarily consists of purse snatching, pick pocketing, thefts, and unattended property (purses/shopping bags), or residential burglary.

Physical assaults are relatively rare, aside from purse snatching. Visitors should be especially alert in crowded markets, buses, and streets. Visitors should not leave any valuables unprotected in their rooms. 2011 saw a steady increase in street crime and residential burglary over past years; this trend is generally attributed to an increase in methamphetamine abuse. (Note: the government of Laos does not publish official crime statistics; however, anecdotal evidence supports the assertion that crime continues to increase over criminal activity measured in previous years.) The present crime trend is not expected to abate, as the law enforcement agencies in Laos are considered generally ineffective and incapable of dealing with the increase in criminal activity.

Road Safety

The traffic situation in Vientiane is considered light when compared to the capitals of the surrounding countries, but 2011 recorded a significant increase in vehicle congestion over previous years. Visitors should be extremely alert to traffic patterns and unexpected movements by motorcycle drivers. Traffic laws and driving habits throughout Laos fail to achieve Western standards. Death and injury attributed to motorcycle and passenger vehicle accidents are commonplace throughout Laos. The seriousness of this is exacerbated by the unavailability of quality health care.

Political Violence



Historical Perspective

There is no noticeable anti-American sentiment among the general public in Laos. The political situation is relatively stable, if difficult to measure.

Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime

Several small bombings occurred in past years in Vientiane; however, none directly targeted Western interests or 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.

International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism

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

The threat of international terrorism in Laos is not without precedent, and visitors to Laos should always exercise caution while traveling throughout the country. Since 2000, there have been periodic attacks on markets, bus stations, various forms of ground transportation, border checkpoints, and other public places. Between February 2003 and November 2004, there were bombings in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and other cities and provinces including Xieng Khouang, Sayabury, Houaphan, and Saysamboun. Between February and 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 in the past. While 2011 remained relatively quiet and stable in most areas of the country, there is a remote risk of a violent reoccurrence in these remote areas. Visitors should remain vigilant with regard to their personal security.

Post-Specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards



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

Drugs and Narco-terrorism

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 have been observed.

Police Response

The legal system within Laos bears little resemblance to that of most developed countries. While the country does have published laws forming the basis of its law enforcement protocols, it also sometimes enforces what appear to be unpublished laws and regulations. Enforcement of these laws can be arbitrary and specific to the situation. Visitors to Laos should be aware that many of the rights afforded to them in the U.S. do not exist within Laos.

Police tend to be poorly trained, poorly equipped, and unresponsive to criminal activity. Although officers are polite, few speak English, and most will not react without a formal authorization from their supervisor officers. Police have set up random checkpoints, imposed occasional curfews, and maintained static posts, which have helped deter some crime.

Where to Turn to for Assistance if you Become a Victim of Crime

An American citizen requiring police assistance should contact the embassy duty officer during non-working hours.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care options in Vientiane are extremely limited. Only limited ambulance service exists, and none of the hospitals in Laos are considered adequate by Western standards. Even a relatively minor medical problem requires a trip or evacuation across the Mekong River to northern Thailand, where better medical facilities exist. An American citizen requiring medical assistance should seek service in Thailand.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim



People planning to visit remotes areas of Laos should contact the embassy Consular Section for up-to-date information. Certain remote areas experience periodic bandit and insurgency activity.

Crime in Laos is relatively less frequent and less violent as compared to crime in the U.S. There has been an increase in crime during the past few years, primarily due to poverty and the increase availability of methamphetamine. Most incidents remain crimes of opportunity. The Embassy advises visitors to follow common sense security measures such as safeguarding valuables and avoiding displays of wealth.

Further Information

U.S Embassy Vientiane
85621-267-000
Embassy Fax: 856-217-190
Embassy Duty Officer: 856-20-555-02-016
Regional Security Office: 856-21-267-116
Consular Section: 856-267-000
Police: 856-21-213-907/8

OSAC Country Council

Laos does not maintain an OSAC Country Council.