

Roam

Five Reasons to Visit Pakse

Why visitors are catching on to the charms of southern Laos

EVEN IN ASIA'S SLEEPIEST nation, Pakse has always seemed unusually languid. Tucked down in Laos' deep south, it was a regional capital in French colonial times and many structures survive from its early 20th century heyday. But then it fell off the map and in recent decades was visited only by the more adventurous backpackers prepared to make the long overland trek. That's all set to change: flights now connect Pakse to Vientiane and Bangkok, and stunning jungle and riverside lodges have sprung up in the region to serve the increasing numbers discovering this gateway to the south. Here are five great reasons to check it out. —RON GLUCKMAN

1 Si Phan Don

Three hours by bus from Pakse, and the mighty Mekong widens to nearly 14 km, flowing through the riverine archipelago of Si Phan Don (literally, Four Thousand Islands). On the biggest islands, Don Khong and Don Det, guesthouses are cheap and the pace addictively idyllic. These are divine places to read those books you always meant to, or pen one of your own. Boat trips take in dolphin sightings and thunderous falls by the Cambodian border. Farther south, on the Mekong Discovery Trail (mekongdiscoverytrail.com), lie some of the least traveled parts of Cambodia.



2 Champasak

The former capital of Laos' southern kingdom, this charming river town is about 40 km south of Pakse and home to Wat Phou, which many consider to be the birthplace of Khmer civilization. From stunning mountaintop ruins, you can look over an ancient reservoir and easily imagine the tendrils of an empire that once connected this place to Angkor and Siam. It was served solely by guesthouses a few years ago, but boutique hotels are now springing up in atmospheric old colonial manors—sure signs of Champasak's emergence. Rent a bike at Inthira Hotel (inthirahotels.com), tel: (856-31) 214 059, and feel like a long-ago explorer, cruising around an infectiously friendly town, where everybody waves a welcome.

3 Bolaven Plateau

A magnificent swatch of jungle 60 km northeast of Pakse, and a cool respite at over 1,000 m, the Bolaven Plateau boasts some of the region's top coffee plantations and lots of nature lodges. Trekking is popular, taking in ethnic tribes and magnificent waterfalls. Some of the biggest falls (dropping 120 m) are right outside your windows at Tad Fane Resort, the original Lao-tian eco-lodge (tadfane.com), tel: (856-20) 553 1400.

4 Treetop Zip Line

You plunge down cliffs and right into waterfalls on a series of heart-pumping zip lines above Dong Hua Sao National Protected Area. Lao adventure specialists Green Discovery recently opened a rustic group of treehouses just outside this sprawling wilderness and some 50 km from Pakse. Guests can glide with chattering parrots and monkeys, dropping into pristine canyons. You have to trek into the treetop Jungle Hotel to begin with, but once you arrive, 24-hour adrenaline is on tap. See greendiscoverylaos.com, tel: (856-21) 264 528.

5 Pakse

Although the surrounding countryside is full of attractions, Pakse is also a delightful destination in itself. With a fine stock of historic buildings, sprinkled with charming coffeehouses and riverside restaurants, Pakse is a perfect place to laze for a few extra days. The proprietors of the Pakse Hotel (hotelpakse.com), tel: (856-31) 212 131—he's French and she's from Pakse's royal family—are fountains of local information, and the hotel's rooftop restaurant is a wonderful place for cold refreshments or a breezy panorama.