

SAFETY AND SECURITY

Over the last couple of decades Laos has earned a reputation among visitors as a remarkably safe place to travel, with little crime reported and few of the scams so often found in more touristed places such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. As a visitor, however, you're an obvious target for thieves (who may include your fellow travellers), so do take necessary precautions.

PETTY CRIME

Petty theft and serious crimes do happen throughout the country – even on seemingly deserted country roads. Petty crime is more common in Vang Vieng than just about anywhere else in Laos, with drunk tourists often leaving themselves open to theft and **robbery**. Although crime rates in Vientiane are low, be on your guard in darker streets outside the city centre, and along the river. Motorbike-borne thieves ply the city streets and have been known to snatch bags out of the front basket of other motorbikes that they pass.

If you do have anything stolen, you'll need to get the police to write up a report in order to claim on your insurance: bring along a Lao speaker to simplify matters if you can.

Carry your passport, travellers' cheques and other valuables in a concealed money belt and don't leave anything important lying about in your room, particularly when staying in rural bungalows. A few hotels have safes which you may want to use, although you should keep in mind that you never know who has access to the safe. A padlock and chain, or a cable lock, is useful for doors and windows at inexpensive guesthouses and budget hotels and for securing your pack on buses, where you're often separated from your belongings. It's also a good idea to keep a reserve of cash, photocopies of the relevant pages of your passport, insurance details and travellers' cheque receipts separate from the rest of your valuables.

UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE

The Second Indochina War left Laos with the dubious distinction of being the most heavily bombed country per capita in the history of warfare. The areas of the country most affected by aerial bombing are along the border of Vietnam – especially in southern Laos where the border runs parallel to the former Ho Chi Minh Trail; also heavily targeted was Xieng Khuang province in the northeast. Other provinces, far from the border with Vietnam, were the site of land battles in which both sides lobbed artillery and mortar shells at each other. A fair quantity of this ordnance did not explode. These dangerous relics of the war have been known as UXO (unexploded ordnance).

So, it's best to stay on trails and beware any odd-looking metallic objects that you may come across. Picking something up for closer inspection (or giving it a kick to turn it over) can be suicidal. When taking a toilet break during long-distance bus journeys, it's not a good idea to penetrate too deeply into the bush looking for privacy.