



(Left) A young girl runs past a colonial era building in the heart of Pakse; (below) a market trader at Talat Dao Heuang selling fish caught in the Mekong; Pakse's riverside restaurants are a good place to relax, watch fishermen and enjoy the view of the distant mountains



Market values

Laos moves at its own unhurried pace but in the vibrant riverside town of Pakse, the mood is distinctly upbeat. Here, day is broken by a dawn chorus of seductive banter and vigorous bargaining between traders and customers at Talat Dao Heuang, the country's largest fresh market.

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In rural Laos, the majority of its 6.3 million citizens still eke out a living by farming the fertile valleys and floodplains, and by netting a bountiful daily catch of freshwater fish from the murky waters of the Mekong. The fruits of their labour are displayed in all their splendor by traders at Talat Dao Heuang, located on the outskirts of town. The opening of the nearby 1.5km-long Laos-Japanese bridge and more convenient links to neighbouring Thailand helped the market flourish and gain prominence as an important regional trade centre.

To catch the market at its bustling best, rise early, hail a *tuk-tuk* and arrive before 7am. For visitors, it is a feast for the senses; a kaleidoscope of colours and heady aromas – some, in

the case of *pla daek*, the pungent Lao fermented fish paste, not always pleasant. Many sellers have an endearing way of arranging their produce in small heaps, bunching salad vegetables together and threading them on strips of bamboo. Small river fish are attractively stacked and freshly-cooked food is placed in portion-sized bowls, ready to tip into a bag when a customer makes a purchase. Wild food, still an important part of the Lao diet, is also available and the selection includes ant eggs, a popular and nutritious addition to curries, as well as lizards which are grilled and served to accompany a spicy mango salad.

The culinary landscape of Laos and that of Talat Dao Heuang has also been influenced by a long history of migrant labour ▶



Laos

▪ Getaway

from Vietnam and a significant number settled in Pakse. In a large clean and covered area of the market, visitors can enjoy a delicious breakfast of Vietnamese delights including the ubiquitous *pho*, a comforting noodle soup of beef or chicken with liberal additions of fresh herbs and vegetables, and of course, fiery chillies. Other Vietnamese favourites on offer include *naem neung*, tasty little 'do-it-yourself' rice paper

wraps with grilled meat balls, lettuce, and herbs; *ban cuan*, steamed rice flour sheets stuffed with meat and mushrooms; *yor kao* and *yor jeun*, fresh and fried spring rolls, respectively.

But it's not just fresh produce that attracts customers to this market. Bundles of the local currency, *kip*, are deftly counted and exchanged for intricately woven silk including the *paa sin*, or sarong which is still worn by Lao women. Every elegant Lao lady dressed in her *paa sin* and silk blouse adds the finishing touches to her beauty with exquisitely crafted silver jewellery. Large bracelets and bangles, earrings and necklaces in modern and traditional designs can also be bought here.

A town of many charms

After an enlightening stroll around the market and a leisurely breakfast, visitors can explore Pakse. The largest town in the Champasak province, it sits at the confluence of the Mekong River and the Se Don, from which it gets its name (Pakse means 'mouth of the river Se'). During the French colonial era – a period that lasted from 1893 until Laos gained full

independence in 1954 – the country's present day national borders were established and infrastructure developed. As an important administrative centre for the French, Pakse benefitted from

the construction of fine French-style buildings. Today, although many remain, they have suffered from years of neglect and are in a state of disrepair. However, they do give the town an undeniable faded charm and a pleasant morning can be spent wandering the streets in search of brick and stucco villas with wooden shuttered windows. The distinctly provincial French designs, modified to suit the humid climate with the addition of verandahs and balconies, were built by Vietnamese labourers

PEACEFUL EVENINGS
CAN BE SPENT AT SEVERAL
FLOATING RESTAURANTS



(Facing page) The 4,000 Islands is one of Laos' most picturesque regions; (right) a stall owner preparing bowls of *pho*, Vietnamese-style noodles that are a popular breakfast dish; (left) street-side dining

who also constructed their own two-storey shophouses, many of which remain in downtown Pakse. The town's enviable location on the banks of the Mekong makes it popular with diners and peaceful evenings can be spent at several floating restaurants. Arrive at around 5.30pm and enjoy a refreshing drink while watching local fishermen cast their nets. Then, as the sun sinks into the river, order local Lao delicacies such as *goy pla*, a tasty salad made from steamed freshwater fish and copious amounts of fragrant mint and lemongrass.

Beyond Pakse

With the recent completion of a new highway from Pakse to Champasak, the town also makes an excellent base for exploring the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Vat Phou. The historic monument dates from the 6th century but was also part of the Khmer Angkor Empire between the 10th and 13th centuries. As one of the most significant historical sites in Laos, ▶

▪ Getaway



Two local women walk past a row of shophouses that were built during the French occupation; (below) Vat Phou in Champasak is a highlight of southern Laos but it's a steep climb to the top




it is an essential feature on any southern Laos travel itinerary. The temple complex comprises six levels and requires a steep climb up to the top, but visitors are amply rewarded with a spectacular view across the surrounding area. The temple is also the location for one of Laos' most important annual Buddhist festivals, Makha Bussa. The event takes place during the full moon in Feb and sees hundreds of monks and Buddhists pilgrims gather for three days of celebrations and merry-making.

Just south of Champasak, the Mekong widens, creating an area of islands and sandbars known as Si Pan Don – the 4,000 islands. Varying in size with the seasonal rise and fall of the river, many are uninhabited. Larger islands such as Don Khong, Don Det and Don Khon are extremely popular with travellers. The latter is also the location of the famous Li Pi Falls. The 4,000 Islands is one of Laos' most beautiful areas and also one of its most popular with backpackers. The island of Don Det attracts droves of travellers who enjoy cheap riverside accommodation and days of lazing in the sun.

Lying just east of Pakse, the expansive Bolaven Plateau's altitude and cool climate made it the ideal location for coffee plantations during French rule. However, when Laos gained independence, the industry went into decline but in

recent years, the crop has enjoyed a revival and Lao coffee is attracting well-deserved attention. Today, hundreds of villagers tend coffee bushes and there are also several large commercial plantations, mainly around the town of Pak Xong. If you haven't time to explore the plateau, organic Pak Xong coffee can be found for sale in Talat Dao Heuang and other local markets. Whether exploring the country's largest fresh market, discovering the rich cultural heritage of Vat Phou and the unique environment of the 4,000 Islands, or dining beside the Mekong with friends, southern Laos never fails to enchant and inspire. ☑

 Malaysia Airlines flies from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Bangkok (BKK); from there transport can be arranged to Laos