

# Indochina in your hands



**Peaks district:** Laos' former capital and its most popular city, Luang Prabang, sits in the Mekong basin



## Bombs and Buddhism

**BUDDHISM** – the national religion – was introduced into the region in the eighth century and the area fell under Khmer rule for 400 years from the ninth century. The French also staked a claim, arriving in the late 1800s and leaving a lasting imprint. Independence came in 1953, coinciding with the breakout of civil war between communists and royalists – each backed by global superpowers. During this period, Laos became one of the most heavily bombed regions in the world.

## Going underground

**LAOS** delivers on many levels – including a subterranean one. In the country's remote northeastern province of Hua Phan is Vieng Xay ([tourismloaos.org](http://tourismloaos.org)), a dramatic network of limestone caves that once sheltered thousands of guerrilla



**Enlightened:** Buddhist monks on the streets of Laos' capital city of Vientiane

fighters for almost a decade in the 1960s. Once out of bounds to tourists, it's now possible to tour the complex including the former residential quarters, theatre, shops and even the old elephant enclosure.

One of the most interesting is the cave of Kaysone Phomvihane, who later went onto become the country's

president. His secret bunker – 140m long – consists of rooms separated by concrete walls.

## Setting sail

A **CRUISE** down the Mekong features on many bucket lists. The Dok Keow (from £110 per person, [experiencetravelgroup.com](http://experiencetravelgroup.com)) is a private charter boat based in Luang Prabang. It has cabins sleeping up to four and its bespoke trips are more comfortable than many others, ranging from a few hours to two nights.

'The Dok Keow has traditional touches such as local hardwoods, modern amenities, an amazingly quiet engine and an interesting itinerary all the way to the Lao border with Thailand,' says guide Rob Hanson.

Alternatively, take a night cruise with Evaneos Travel (from £125, [evaneos-travel.com](http://evaneos-travel.com)) into Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park, one of the last refuges of Bengal tigers in Indochina.

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**Warrens:** Guerilla fighters hid out in a cave complex



by Akaryn hotel in Vientiane