

Laos

Country name	Laos ¹
State title	Lao People's Democratic Republic
Name of citizen	Lao
Official language	Lao
Country name in official language	No official form, but informally: Muang Lao / Pathét Lao ²
State title in official language	ສາທາລະນະລັດ ປະຊາທິປະໄຕ ປະຊາຊົນລາວ (Sathalanalat Paxathipatai Paxaxôn Lao) ³
Writing system	Lao
ISO-3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	LA/LAO
Capital city in official language	ວຽງຈັນ (Viangchan)
Conventional name of capital city	Vientiane
Population / Area	7.4 million (UN data 2021) / 230,800km ²

Introduction

Laos is landlocked and shares boundaries with Cambodia; China; Myanmar (Burma); Thailand and Vietnam. The Mekong River forms a large part of the boundary with Thailand, while the Annamite Mountains form most of the eastern border with Vietnam.

Laos gained independence from France becoming a constitutional monarchy in 1953; a subsequent period of civil war saw Communists overthrow the monarchy in 1975 and the one-party state has remained since.

For a fuller PCGN paper, see [Laos: Toponymy and the Quests for National Identity, 2005](#).

Geographical names policy

It is PCGN policy to apply the [BGN/PCGN Romanization Agreement for Lao](#) to Lao script geographical names (or use a Roman-script source that applies this romanization system). Widely used French-style spellings may be used alongside the romanized forms as required, e.g. Viangchan (Vientiane).

¹ There is no comparable short name in Lao, or indeed in English in e.g. the United Nations. However, as the common English-language name in British English, PCGN recommends **Laos** as the country name for HMG purposes.

² meaning *Lao 'space'* (lit. city/town, see Administrative structure) / *Lao state*, respectively.

³ Romanized according to the [BGN/PCGN Romanization Agreement for Lao](#), see more in *Romanization*.

The US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) [Geographic Names Server](#) can be used as a source for names in Laos.

Language

Lao, sometimes seen as Laotian, is the official language of Laos. Spoken Lao is usually mutually intelligible with Thai, and the Lao writing system is visually similar to Thai script.

Romanization

There is no official romanization system in use in Laos for current Lao orthography. The system adopted in 1966 by PCGN and BGN, based on the Commission Nationale de Toponymie (CNT) 1965 system, predates some changes to Lao orthography. As of 2023, the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names is working with Lao authorities to assist in the preparation and approval of an official system.

In the absence of an official system implemented in the country itself, PCGN continues to use the system agreed by BGN and PCGN in 1966.

To illustrate its application, the capital city ວຽງຈັນ is romanized Viangchan, as follows:
 ວ = 'v' (when syllable initial); ງ = 'ia' (medial vowel when followed by syllable-final consonant); ງ = 'ng' (as syllable-final); ຈ = 'ch' with vowel marker 'a' above; ນ = 'n' (as syllable final).

Inventory of characters (and their Unicode encodings⁴):

Lao romanization contains the following letter-diacritic combinations in addition to the unmodified letters of the basic Roman script:

Upper-case character	Unicode encoding	Lower-case character	Unicode encoding
È	00C8	è	00E8
É	00C9	é	00E9
Ô	00D4	ô	00F4

⁴ See www.unicode.org

Map of Laos



Map produced by PCGN for illustrative purposes only, and is not to be taken necessarily as representing the views of the UK government on boundaries or political status.

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Administrative structure

Laos is divided into 1 prefecture (*kampèng nakhon*) (Viangchan) (LA-VT) and 17 provinces (*khouèng*) at the first-order administrative level (ADM1). Administrative centre names may also be seen in their long form with generic term Muang (city): e.g. Muang Pakxan.

ADM1 Lao	ADM1 Romanized Lao	Variant forms ⁵	ISO 3166-2 code	Administrative centre	Centre location
ອັດຕະປື	Attapu	Attapeu	LA-AT	Attapu	14°48'55"N 106°49'32"E
ບໍ່ແກ້ວ	Bokèo	Bokeo	LA-BK	Ban Houayxay	20°16'12"N 100°25'04"E
ບໍລິຄຳໄຊ	Bolikhamxai	Borikhamxay	LA-BL	Pakxan	18°23'39"N 103°39'40"E
ຈຳປາສັກ	Champasak	Champasack	LA-CH	Pakxé	15°07'01"N 105°49'05"E
ຫົວພັນ	Houaphan	Huaphanh	LA-HO	Xam Nua	20°24'59"N 104°02'42"E
ຄຳມ່ວນ	Khammouan	Khammuane	LA-KH	Thakhèk	17°24'03"N 104°49'18"E
ຫລວງນ້ຳທາ	Louang Namtha	Luangnamtha	LA-LM	Louang Namtha	20°57'42"N 101°24'14"E
ຫລວງພະບາງ	Louangphabang	Luangprabang	LA-LP	Louangphabang	19°53'36"N 102°09'09"E
ອຸດົມໄຊ	Oudômxai	Oudomxay	LA-OU	Xai ⁶	20°41'32"N 101°59'05"E
ຟັງສາລີ	Phôngsali	Phongsaly	LA-PH	Phôngsali	21°40'51"N 102°06'01"E
ສາລະວັນ	Salavan	Saravane	LA-SL	Salavan	15°42'59"N 106°25'03"E
ສະຫວັນນະເຂດ	Savannakhét	Savannakhet	LA-SV	Kaysone Phomvihane ⁷	16°34'13"N 104°45'44"E
ວຽງຈັນ	Viangchan	Vientiane	LA-VT	Viangchan	17°58'00"N 102°56'00"E

⁵ As noted in *Geographical names policy* above, if it is felt to be useful for a particular product, the French-style variant name can be used alongside the romanized form.

⁶ Also seen as Oudômxai

⁷ Believed officially to have changed name in 2005, many sources continue to use the name Savannakhét as the town's name. This can be included in brackets after the official name if deemed useful.

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

ADM1 Lao	ADM1 Romanized Lao	Variant forms ⁵	ISO 3166-2 code	Administrative centre	Centre location
ວຽງຈັນ	Viangchan	Vientiane	LA-VI	Phôn-Hông	18°29'43"N 102°24'55"E
ໄຊຍະບູລີ	Xaignabouli	Xayabury	LA-XA	Xaignabouli	19°15'27"N 101°42'37"E
ໄຊສົມບູນ	Xaisômboun ⁸	Xaysomboon	LA-XS	Xaisômboun ⁹	18°53'56"N 103°05'31"E
ຊຽງຂວາງ	Xiangkhouang	Xiengkhuang	LA-XI	Phôn-savan	19°26'58"N 103°11'30"E
ເຊກອງ	Xékong	Sekong	LA-XE	Xékong	15°21'01"N 106°43'43"E

Other significant locations

PCGN Approved name ¹⁰	Other names	Feature Type	Location
Annamite Mountains	Annamite Chain Chaîne Annamitique (<i>fra</i>) Phou Louang (<i>lao</i>) Truong Son (<i>vie</i>)	Mountain range (Laos; Vietnam)	18°35'30"N 103°48'00"E
Mekong River	Nam Khong	River	10°11'24"N 106°45'00"E
Phou Bia	-	Mountain, Laos' high point (2819m)	18°58'50"N 103°09'08"E
Phouphiang Bolavén	Boloven Plateau	Plateau	15°12'01"N 106°15'35"E
Thôn Haihin (Plain of Jars)	Plain of Jars	Plain	19°25'52"N 103°09'09"E

⁸ Formerly a special region (*khétphisét*), Xaisômboun became a province in 2013.

⁹ It is believed that the town of Xaisômboun within the district of Anouvông is the administrative centre, though no official confirmation has been seen, and some reports show Anouvông as the name of the centre.

¹⁰ PCGN recommends use of conventional names for international features where they exist. If there is no conventional name, then the relevant name can be shown on the appropriate side of the international boundary on cartographic products.

Useful references

- BBC country profile: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898>
- CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/laos/>
- Ethnologue: <https://www.ethnologue.com/>
- FCDO Geographical Names & Information:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/geographical-names-and-information>
- ISO Online Browsing Platform (OBP): <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui>
- Laos: Administrative Map of Lao PDR, 1:1,500,000, National Geographic Department, Laos, 2000 [bi-scriptual]
- Laos: Socio-Economic Atlas of the Lao PDR,
http://www.nsc.gov.la/Atlas/links/PDF/1_section_A.pdf *[link no longer accessible, contact PCGN for a copy]*
- PCGN Information Paper: [Laos: Toponymy and the Quests for National Identity, 2005](#)
- PCGN Country Names list: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/country-names>
- PCGN Romanization Agreement for Lao: [BGN/PCGN Romanization Agreement for Lao](#)
- Unicode: www.unicode.org
- US Board on Geographic Names Geographic Names Server: [GNS Search & Download WebApp \(nga.mil\)](https://www.nga.mil)

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