

Cycling Laos, Luang Prabang to Vientiane

As many travel guides recommend cycling this part of Laos but most of the times fail to thoroughly describe the profile of the route, we thought the below information might be helpful for all touring cyclists who want to know in advance what to expect. Additionally the route is mostly described from South to North, which we think is more difficult.

From Luang Prabang to Vieng Vang the route is extremely scenic and tough, after Vieng Vang it gets a bit boring and easier. The roads are all sealed, mostly in good condition and keep undulating almost until Vientiane. The total distance is about 445km (435km, see day 5) and we cycled this in early June 2013 in five days as described below.

Basic guesthouses are available along the route, they sometimes try to charge outrageous prices for little comfort. Negotiate! We never paid the price they asked for. We also met a lot of cyclists who pitched their tents next to a restaurant or a house, a good option in the cooler mountains as well.

Enjoy the ride!

Day 1: Luang Prabang - Kiou Ka Cham, 79km

A hard day as you will climb two long passes. Both passes are doable in one day if you have some basic condition, climbing legs and are not heavily overweight (note that Bärbel has about 25kg luggage on her bike and Johan 35kg). Our net riding time was 7.5 hours at an average speed of slightly above 10km/h. Bear in mind that Bärbel got sick 10km into the last hill and had to climb extremely slowly. You could also stop after the first pass, but you need to camp as the only guesthouse on this part of the journey is in Xiang-Ngeun 25km after Luang Prabang. You can get bottled water along the way and you should buy your lunch in Xiang-Ngeun, just to be on the safe side.

It starts with a very easy 8km climb, you hardly notice you are climbing, followed by 2km tougher climbing. Then you descent for about 5km, before you climb another kilometer. Then the road descends for about 2.5km. The next 7km you will ride on a flat road and then you will have to climb your first hill of 12.5km. At 32km there is a nice viewpoint and drink stop with a few shaded shacks overlooking the valley. Unfortunately there is also a desperate chained little monkey. After 39km you will descend for 1.5km and then climb for another 2km. You're at the summit of your first pass. Now you can look forward to a long descent of 15km. Here it is also decision time if you want to camp or continue as you will start climbing as of 56km for 21.5km. The last 1.5km are flat/descending and you can more or less roll into the village. You will find two guesthouses on the right handside in the middle of the village. We stayed at the first one, very basic but fantastic views at the back in the early morning, don't miss them! You're at an altitude of 1,400m by the way. And congratulations if you made it in one day.



Day 2: Kiou Ka Cham - Phou-Khoun, ca. 55km

This is another hard day as you will ride on undulating roads all day long. Bottled water is available along the route but take your food as you might get hungry in the middle of nowhere. It's another very scenic day with a lot of nice viewpoints.

The riding begins with a rolling pattern for about 14km when it descends for about 7km. From then on you will continue on undulating roads until Phou-Khoun. You will find a lot of overpriced guesthouses in town. At the end of town at the right handside in the direction of Krati is another nice looking guesthouse that might be worth checking.

After the previous very tough day it is nice to arrive a little earlier and rest. If you still have energy you could continue another 45km until Krati as the coming part isn't too difficult. Another option might be to continue cycling another 24km (21km before Krati) where you will find a nice bungalow hot spring guesthouse with restaurant. And it isn't expensive as other cyclists told us. Up to you!



Day 3: Phou-Khoun - Vang Vieng, 102km

This day is the most scenic of all days and we stopped often to take pictures of the stunning landscape. Today you can get lunch in Kasi, we arrived there after about 3.5 hours. In total we cycled 6:40 hours at an average speed of over 15km/h.

The day starts on undulating roads for about 16km. Then you will descend for 6.5km and the rolling up and down pattern continues until you've reached the 35km mark. The last 10km to Kasi are easy, you either descend or cycle on flat roads. You will find many restaurants and a market in Kasi where you can recharge your batteries before you continue in the afternoon.



The undulating road continues until you've cycled about 58km in total. You will climb for the next 10km, the first 7km are easy going and the last 3km are tough but doable. You've reached your last summit and will now descend for 10km into a valley and ride on flat roads until you've reached Vang Vieng.

Vang Vieng is a convenient place for a few rest days. If you are a party animal go downtown, there are tons of places to have fun. If not, check out the Organic Farm at about 4km before Vang Vieng. They have nice rooms, delicious food and fruit shakes (try the mulberry shake, you will get addicted) and you can volunteer as well.

Day 4: Vang Vieng - Thinkeo, 102km

Most people will tell you that there is no more climbing after Vang Vieng. They are wrong. You will no longer climb huge passes but there are hills and undulating roads continue. We cycled the total distance in 6 hours at an average speed of 17km/h. On this part there is again no need to take food, you will pass through towns and villages where you can get the typical noodle soup or sticky rice and fruit is available as well. The route is nice and scenic at the beginning, but nothing compared to what you've seen the previous days, half way through it gets very boring. We decided to cycle via the artificial lake Ang Nam Ngum as people told us that it is very scenic. We met other cyclists who cycled the distance of about 150km to Vientiane along highway 13 in one day. Again, up to you!

You will start cycling on flat roads for 11km. Until 75km you will ride on undulating roads and this stretch ends with a longer climb of about 15 minutes. Once over this small pass you will continue on flat roads until you've reached Phonhong at 87km. Traffic is picking up as from Vang Vieng but still not tough.

The road to Thinkeo is dusty and traffic is high with a lot of trucks and SUVs passing at high speed. This part is no fun to ride and it becomes undulating once more. In Thinkeo you will find loads of hotels and guesthouses to choose from. If you arrive early we recommend you cycle to the lake without your luggage. It is about 6.5km to get there and there is a very steep hill to climb, almost impossible with luggage. We did it the next day with luggage as it was raining in the afternoon, which wasn't a good idea at all. If you cannot make it on the same day be aware that the road to the lake is a dead end road and you need to cycle about 5km back to get to highway 10 to Vientiane. Whatever your maps are telling you, it is a dead end! But it is worth cycling there as the lake with its many islands is really beautiful. You could have dinner by the lake at one of the restaurant. Also bear in mind that you will not a single time see the lake from highway 10, there are always hills in between.



Day 5: Thinkeo - Vientiane, 107km

You will have to cycle about 10km less if you do the lake the day before. Today the landscape is OK at the beginning and while you are cycling along the river but becomes very boring and busy afterwards. The road is undulating once again for the first 4.5km followed by a longer climb of 1.5km. Then you'll descend for 2km and continue on flat or slightly hilly roads until you reach Vientiane.

Congratulations! You made it to Vientiane and now deserve a treat after some strenuous days. We hope you enjoyed the cycling as much as we did.

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