

# Xieng Khuang: the land of national heritage sites

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Many people may know of Xieng Khuang province as a battlefield with a large amount of unexploded ordnance (UXO) that was dropped during the Indochina War. Since liberation in 1975, the government of the Lao PDR, in collaboration with international organisations, has cleared and developed this area with the aim of transforming it from a war zone to a tourist destination. This has helped to improve the living conditions of local people and is part of the Lao government's poverty reduction plan.

Xieng Khuang is one of the country's 16 provinces and is centrally located in northern Laos, about 435km northeast of Vientiane. The province consists largely of rugged terrain and features the awesome beauty of towering green mountains and karst formations.

The province's original capital city, Meuang Khoun, was almost totally destroyed during the war and consequently the capital was moved to nearby Phonsavan. Of a number of Meuang Khoun Buddhist temples built between the 16th and 19th centuries, only ruins remain. Vat Piavat, however, survived the bombings without major damage and can still be visited.

The striking and mysterious Plain of Jars in Xieng Khuang province is one of the most important sites related to the late prehistory of mainland Southeast Asia.

This enigmatic archaeological site consists of clusters of large stone jars, varying in height and diameter from one to over three metres, which dot the landscape. Jars have been founded in more than 50 places in the province, ranging from a single jar to groups of over 400.

One local legend states that the jars were originally constructed for an ancient king, but archaeological evidence suggests they were funerary



**Site One (Thong Hai Hin) is located 15 km southwest of the Xieng Khuang provincial capital, Phonsavan.**

urns, carved by an Iron Age civilisation around 2,500 years ago.

The three major sites in the Plain of Jars are easily accessible, and have largely been cleared of unexploded ordnance (UXO), although it's advisable not to stray from the main paths. Site One (Thong Hai Hin) is located 15 km southwest of Phonsavan.

This site has a large collection of over 250 jars, and also the nation's largest single jar which, according to local lore, is the victory cup of the legendary king Khoun Cheuang, who liberated local people from an oppressive ruler.

Another jar site is located 25 km south of Phonsavan. The site is known locally as Hai Hin Phou *Salato*, as the French in the 1930s regularly used the hill for picnics. Here about 100 jars are spread across two adjacent hillsides.

The most attractive site, Hai Hin Lat Khai (Site Three), is a further 10 km south. The main group of 150 jars is located on top of a small hill from which one can enjoy amazing views not only of the surrounding plains, but also of the prosperous farming community of Ban Xiengdy in the valley

below. This village, located at the entrance to the jar site, has a small Buddhist temple where visitors are welcome.

Other attractions in the province include two hot mineral springs that can be visited near Meuang Kham on the way to Huaphan province.

Meuang Khoun is located 30 km southeast of Phonsavan and was once the royal capital of the Phuan Kingdom. Although the town was heavily bombed during the war, a few buildings remain in the town centre alongside Vat Siphoum with its large sitting Buddha statue.

In addition, visitors can see number of other historical sites in Xieng Khuang including Thatfoun, That Chomphet, and Vat Phiavat.

Another tourist attraction in the province is an ancient rocket launching platform on Koud Mountain that local people estimate to have been built during the same period as the jars. Construction of a set of concrete steps to the top of the mountain has begun, and when work is complete there will be 1,100 steps to reach the rocket platform.

According to local folklore, the Phuan ethnic group used

to hold a rocket festival on the mountain to seek good fortune from the gods. They believed that the place where the biggest rocket landed would be especially fertile ground for growing crops.

According to the legend, some small- and medium-sized rockets were launched. A novice was then assigned to launch the largest rocket. He was unable to light the rocket and so a venerable monk was asked to launch it and it took off with the monk and novice to another province.

Lao Airlines flies between Vientiane and Xieng Khuang every day except Saturday. Buses leave Vientiane at the Northern Bus Station in Dongnathong village for Phonsavan 6 times a day via Vangvieng, and you can then leave from Phongsavan to Luang Prabang (8 hours), Huaphan (8 hours) and Vinh, across the border in Vietnam (3 hours). The price for normal buses from Vientiane to Phonsavan is 110,000 kip and 150,000 kip for VIP.

Jumbos and tuk-tuks are the main form of public transport in town. Cars and guides can be hired through travel agencies.