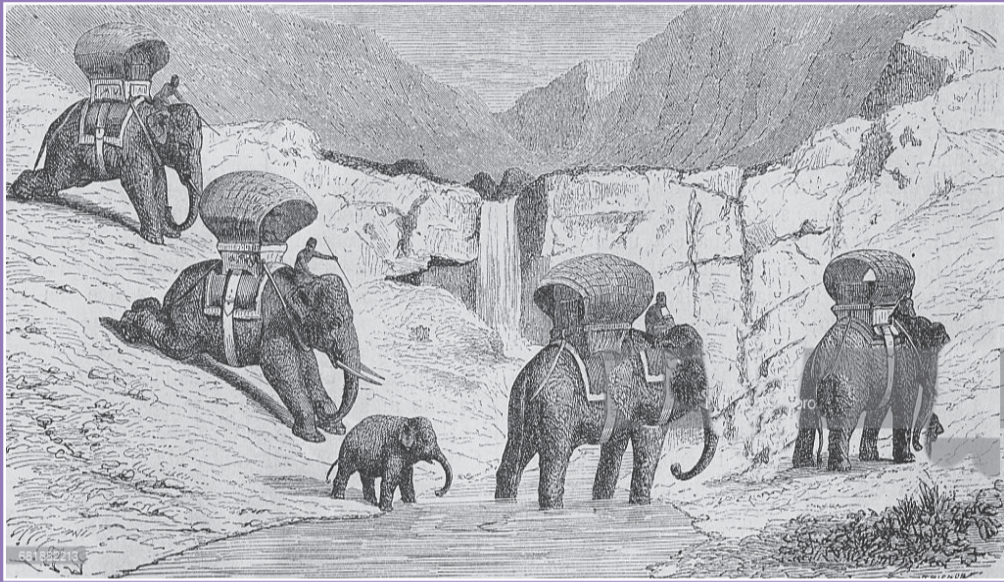


# As tradition goes...

At three years of age, a young elephant must be trained, and schooling starts with a ceremony involving the entire village. Family and friends build a wooden cage during a feast provided by the future mahout before training begins, during which a master – using a generations-old method combining discipline and tenderness – guides the new mahout. The month-long break-in period begins with the master fighting spirits possessing the elephant and purifying the cage. At the close of the breaking-in period, the master carves several names on sugar cane stems and presents them to the elephant, which chooses its name by picking one of the canes. This marks the entry of the elephant into the world of men.



# SAYABOULI LAOS Hongsa District History and weaving



### How to get there?

National Road N. A4 from Sayaboury province capital (102 km), Luang Prabang (219 km) and to International Border at Ban Nam Ngeun into Thailand (43 km). From the boat landing at Thaxuang on the Mekong River it takes 1 hour by public taxi to Hongsa. Daily speed and slow boat service to Pakbeng and Luang Prabang.

### Transportation Time Table

Destination	Departure	Transport	Time	Price (Kip)	Distance
Luang Prabang	08.00am	Boat	7 hrs	?????	130 Km
Vientiane	09.00am	Bus	9 hrs	200,000	555 Km
Sayabouli	09.00am	Van	2 hrs	60,000	98 Km
Pakbeng	08.30am	Van	3 hrs	75,000	93 Km

### HONGSA DISTRICT IN FIGURES

- 45 villages
- Population - 6000
- Area Code - 074
- 6 ethnic groups - Lao, Lue, Khmu, Prai, Hmong, Myan.
- Agriculture - Rice, maize, peanuts, sesame, job's tears, paper mulberry, garlic, rubber.
- Handicraft - Lue weaving, embroidery products, and bamboo weaving.

### CULTURAL FESTIVALS

#### Pii Mai Lao (Lao New Year)

Celebrated over three days in mid-April, and with plenty of festive water splashing, Hongsa presents New Year's celebrations that include cultural performances, food stalls, and clothing and handicraft fairs. Village temples hold more modest functions, as they mainly focus on religious rituals.

#### Boun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival)

This late-May/early June festival - linked to fertility and bringing rain – kicks off with a parade of homemade rockets from

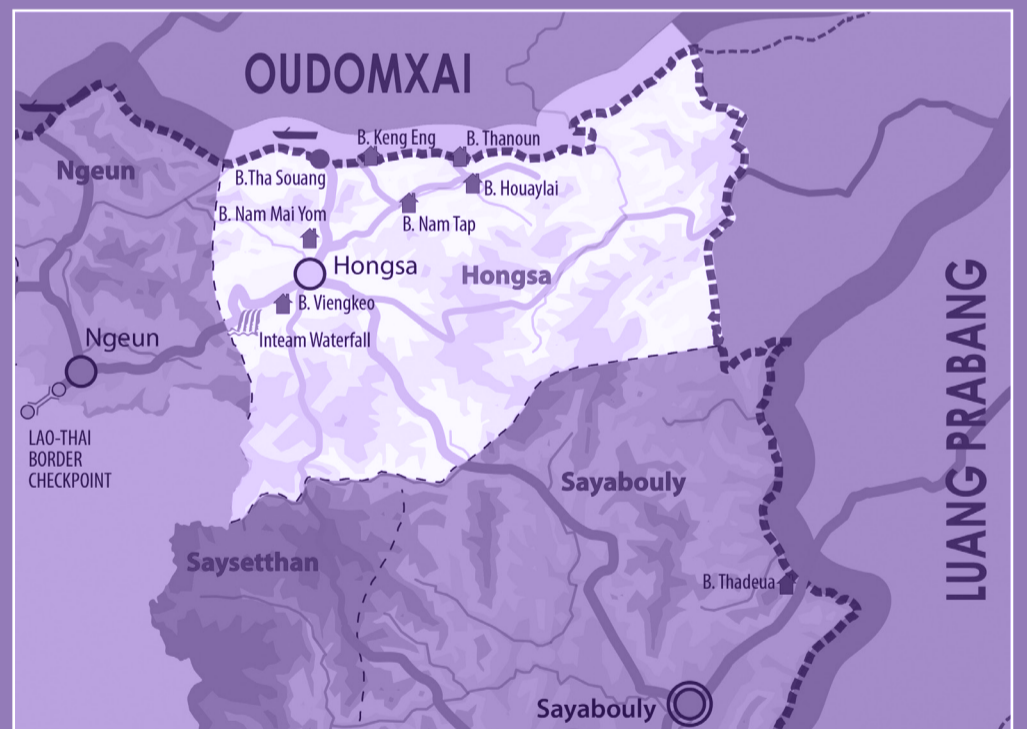
competing villages. The crowd thickens as the large bamboo rockets reach the field from which they are launched skyward.

#### Boun Ork Phansaa (End of Buddhist Lent)

Generally taking place in early October, this two-day festival celebrates the end of the three-month Buddhist lent during which monks and novices study and meditate. Locals make merit in the morning at their temples before gathering at rivers in the evening and launching heua fai (small, banana-leaf floats with flowers and lit candles) on waterways to wish for a brighter future and cast off bad luck.

#### The Baci Ceremony

Lao villagers perform this ritual to welcome visitors or send them off, and during weddings. This sacred ceremony, in which blessings are symbolically tied to one's wrist with strings, is also a reconciliation gesture, and the faithful believe it can help cure many illnesses.



### MAP LEGEND

#### Hotels/Guesthouse

- 01 Ban Hongsa guesthouse
- 02 Vilavong hotel
- 03 Hotel Khamvongsa
- 04 Mixay Guesthouse
- 05 Auberge Sala Inpeng
- 06 Ban Hongsa guesthouse
- 07 Vilavong hotel
- 08 otel Khamvongsa
- 09 Mixay Guesthouse
- 10 Auberge Sala Inpeng

#### Restaurants

- 11 Orchard restaurant
- 12 Ban Kun restaurant
- 13 Sion tong restaurant
- 14 Vilavong restaurant
- 15 Orchard restaurant

- 16 Ban Kun restaurant
- 17 Sion tong restaurant
- 18 Vilavong restaurant

#### What to see

- 19 Inteam Waterfall
- 20 Khamsane Waterfall
- 21 Keng Eng village
- 22 That Marn Stupa
- 23 Vat Simongkhoun
- 24 Inteam Waterfall
- 25 Khamsane Waterfall
- 26 Keng Eng village
- 27 That Marn Stupa
- 28 Vat Simongkhoun

#### Useful sites

- 29 Post Office
- 30 Tourtist Office
- 31 Bus Station

- 32 Post Office
- 33 Tourtist Office
- 34 Bus Station
- 35 Post Office
- 36 Tourtist Office
- 37 Bus Station
- 38 Post Office
- 39 Tourtist Office
- 40 Bus Station

Hongsa used to be the cradle of Lao elephant culture for centuries. However, with the establishment of the country's largest coal mine in this district, most elephants have moved to other districts such as Thongmixay and Sayabouli. Mahouts and some elephants still inhabit Hongsa it remains a place where you can learn the secrets of Tai Lue mahout and their elephants. Watch out for baby elephants! Elephant Taming and Baci ceremonies are unique occasions to join.

**Weaving.** The Lue village Ban Viengkeo is most famous for its elaborate weaving traditions. Dye yarn from self made natural colors and learn how to weave. Ban Viengkeo is located very close to Hongsa town, and just a one hour ride away from the Mekong boat landing of Tha Suang, and two hours by car from Sayabouly.

The Hongsa, a celestial swan, in Lao and Thai cultures is represented as a majestic creature that dressed in golden armor. It protected the kings during battles and soared the waters with elegance and pride. Although there are numerous appearances of Hongsa in Lao architecture, little is known about its origin. From ancient murals, pictures, and sculptures, Hongsa share similar traits as a swan. In Hinduism, Hongsa is also the vehicle of lord Brahma. Hinduism was not the only religion with tales of Hongsa. In Buddhism, Lord Buddha himself was once born as a Hongsa. At that time the Buddha Hongsa was governing 96,000 hongsas.

Hongsa district, once famous for elephants, is also the site of a massive cola power plant. The mega structure has been good for employment in the town and there is a mini-boom going on here.

Hongsa is a logical break between Luang Prabang and Nan (Thailand, via Muang Ngeun). Its centre is a grid of newer constructions but the town's stream-ribboned edges (away from the power station) are backed by beautiful layered rice fields and traditional villages.

- **Inteam Waterfall**  
The waterfall is located at Nongchong mountain, 8 km away from Hongsa, surrounded by green forests.
- **Khamsane Waterfall**  
The waterfall is located near the Mekong River close to Thaxuang village.
- **Keng Eng village**  
Don't miss a boat ride downstream to Keng Eng village to taste the famous homemade Lao Hai. This traditional Khmu alcohol is served in a big jar with long bamboo straws.



Elephant walking through bamboo forest  
Image courtesy of Ho Tzu Nyen

- **Viengkeo and Sibounheuang**  
These two lowland villages offer an opportunity to watch skilled local women weaving cotton and producing beautiful embroidery. Viengkeo village is a fantastic place to purchase unique locally made products and souvenirs. You may also be lucky enough to attend one of the famous elephant Baci ceremonies in Viengkeo. When young elephants reach 3-4 years of age, a master mahout will perform an ancient animist taming ceremony during which young elephants will be trained to understand mahouts' commands and eventually become a family member.



Kain musicians playing traditional songs  
Image courtesy of Ho Tzu Nyen

- **Lak Mueang Stupa**  
This ancient stupa is located on a hill 1 km away from Hongsa. It was built in 1572 AD and is a holy place where people go to worship. It is also a viewing point that overlooks the beautiful valley of Hongsa.

- **That Marn Stupa**  
The stupa is located at That village, about 6 km west of town. According to local traditions, the stupa was built when this part of Laos was under Burmese rule.

- **Vat Simongkhoun**  
One of the town's monasteries, Vat Simongkhoun, contains a stone platform allegedly covering a hole "leading to the end of the world". One of the most characterful of Hongsa's several monasteries, Vat Simongkhoun's hang song pa is fashioned in attractive naive style while the archaic, muralled sim (ordination hall) sits on an oddly raised stone platform covering a large hole that is said to lead to the end of the world. It's 1km west of the centre towards Muang Ngeun, then 100m north after the first river bridge.



View on the farmland at sunset  
Image courtesy of Ho Tzu Nyen



Woman farmer watching the harvest  
Image courtesy of Ho Tzu Nyen