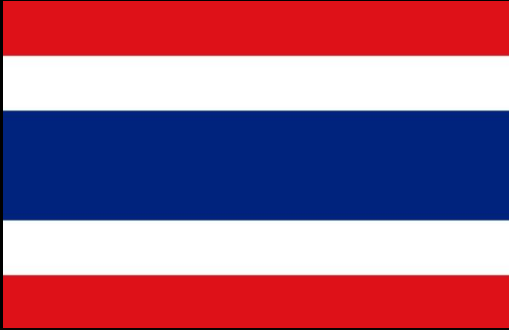
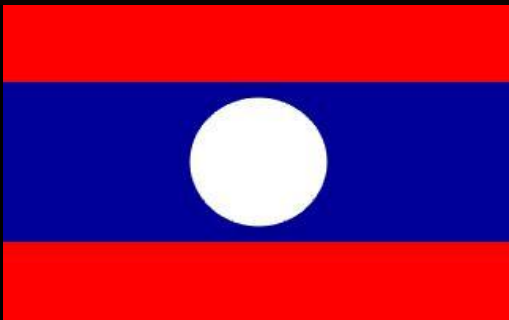


Thai → Lao Guide



Thai to Lao Quick Guide

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Don Hobbs

Asian Lizard Languages

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About this Guide

This guide is for foreigners (non-Thais) who already know some Thai, and would like to learn Lao quickly and easily. In January 2004, I made my first trip into northern Laos after studying Thai in Chiang Mai for 3 months. The text *Lao for Beginners*, by Benjawan Poomsan Becker, was an immense help, and I recommend it as a starting point for anyone interested in seriously studying Lao who does not already know Thai. With my low intermediate level of Thai and after a week of studying her text, listening repeatedly to the phrases and vocabulary, I was able to use the Lao language to function in places well off the beaten path, among locals with hard-to-understand accents, some of whom had never talked to a foreigner before. The 2 weeks I spent in northern Laos talking to villagers and ordinary people made a positive lasting impression on me. In the past 3 years, I have made two more brief trips to Laos and been equally impressed.

Although I had been coming to Thailand for a number of years before that first trip to Laos, I had been too busy trying to learn basic standard Thai as it is commonly taught to us *farang* to have made a key discovery; namely, that half the Thais I was in contact with – from girls working in bars, to friends' spouses, to workers employed in all kinds of blue collar jobs – all pretty much spoke Lao because they were from Issan. What was more, they all really enjoyed speaking Lao with me now that I had a new-found ability to speak it. Although standard Thai and Lao are very similar, taking the time to learn the 10 – 20% of the two languages that is not the same is worthwhile. Although nearly all the Lao in cities near Thailand watch Thai TV and can understand Thai, it still gives most a warm feeling when you can speak Lao with them. And, it's a fairly simple thing to learn to do. That's the purpose of this down-and-dirty guide: to teach you the key differences quickly, in 10 easy parts, so you can start speaking Lao today.

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Phonetic English Used in this Text

Thai is a devilish language to try to write with the English/ Roman alphabet. I have tried to keep things as simple as possible, keeping in mind that most of you are already familiar with many of the Thai words found in the text as well as various spelling systems used for them. I have chosen not to use the official Thai system (RTGS) of spelling Thai words in English, because as you probably know, it is absolutely worthless. In this guide, the letter 't' is used for the sound 'T' as in '*tahan* – soldier,' not the letters 'th.' Similarly, 'g' says G (*gai*-chicken), not 'k' as it is written in RTGS and some other systems.

For the Thai/Lao sound between 'T' and 'D' (ต-Dtao), I have used 'dt' as some popular transcription systems do because I find it more accurate.

Similarly, for the sound between 'P' and 'B' (ป-bplah) I have used 'bp'.

For most long vowels, I have added an 'h' so that the Thai word for sky is spelled '*fah*' and house is '*bahn*.' The exceptions are long e, which is spelled 'ee,' as in the Thai word '*dee*.' And, the long vowel sound oo as in English 'moon' or Thai สนุก (English 'fun') is simply spelled with 'oo.'

The sound in the Thai word for hand มือ "mɯh" is written ɯh. And, the Thai vowel sound in the word 'walk' เดิน is 'dɛhn' spelled with an upside down e/schwa (ə). The long vowel แ which makes the long vowel sound a in 'man' and in 'expensive' แพง or 'taxi' แท็กซี่ is written with 'ae' and usually followed by a note in brackets. For the vowel อ –aw, I have used 'aw' rather than 'or' as is sometimes seen in Thailand.

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For short vowels, I have used standard conventions, so that 'a' says 'a' as in 'father,' e says e as in 'egg,' and so on. The short vowel in the Thai word for 'half' ครึ่ง is ๕. And, the short vowel แะ which makes a very short 'a' sound as in 'dad', I have used á , a with an accent mark above it, so that the words for goat and sheep, แกะ and แกะ respectively, are *pá* and *gá*.

For many words, I have simply taken the liberty to spell them intuitively, as they usually are, so that 'rong rian' is the word for school, rather than something more complicated. Wherever there may be confusion, I have tried to add a note in brackets.

As for tones, I have only put common marks on the most important tones: rising [ǎ], high [á], and falling [â] tones, mostly on long vowels. And again, I have often added a note in brackets as well. (Tones in Thai or Lao for the same word are sometimes different, and within Laos itself they are far from being standard, with regional variance.)

Overall, the transcription/Romanization system I have used is similar to the one used by Paiboon Publishing, with the differences noted here, and generally familiar to a large number of you who have studied Thai. But I have made some of my own intuitive changes in order to simplify things a little. Hopefully, the result meets the guide's aims of being simple and easy to use, while still being as accurate as possible. Sometimes, I have added Thai script as well, for those of you who can read it.

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Part 1: 10 General Rules for Changing Thai to Lao

1. The supposed 'R' sound in standard Thai, written with ร (ra-rua) does not exist. It changes to either an 'L' or 'H' sound in Lao. (In fact, most Thai speakers pronounce it as 'L' unless they are being formal or are put on the spot.) Examples: rian (study) → 'lian' or 'hian' / rong raem (hotel) → long laem or hong haem. Mai luu (don't know) → baw hoo (or baw loo). Whether 'R' becomes an H or an L depends on the location in Laos or on the speaker or the word itself.
2. An 'R' or 'L' sound as a second consonant sound, is left out/unvoiced. Examples: bplah (fish) → bpah; bratet (country) → batet, pláeng (music) → páeng.
3. 'The 'CH' sound in standard Thai becomes 'S' in Lao. Ex: ch๗h (name) → s๗h; chang (elephant) → sang chohk dee (Good luck) → sohk dee.
4. Mai' (for 'not' or as a question particle) → baw. Examples: Sabai dee mai? (How are you?) → 'Sabai dee baw?' Mai mee (there isn't) → Baw mee.
5. 'Yang' (English 'yet') → ñyang. Ex: yang mai (not yet) → nyang baw.
6. 'Duay' (with, together, too, also) → nae (a sound as in 'man'). Example: Bpai duay. (Let's go together.) → Bpai nam nae.

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7. 'Chai' (right) → maen (sounds like English word 'man').
Chai mai? (Right?) → Maen baw? 'Yes, right' = 'maen laeow.'

8. 'Na' (common at end of sentence for future/agreement) → 'dəh' (ເດີ).
Example: chohk dee na → sohk dee dəh.

9. The 'N' sound in some common words changes to 'P' in parts of Laos.
Examples: noon (over there) → poon. Nee (here) → pee.

10. Kap' (krap) and 'ka' sentence endings are not used in Lao.
However, women often end sentences with *jah* and men will use the term *ka noi* for I / me, to be more respectful when talking to someone of higher status.

If you can remember these rules, you're already on your way to speaking Lao!

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Part 2: Ten Question Words

(Notice that most Q words with 1 syllable have a rising tone, and for those with 2 syllables, the second syllable has a rising tone.)

1. Arai' (what) → **iyǎng/nyǎng**

(ny makes a rolled ñ sound as in Spanish 'jalapeño').

Example: Nee (ben) arai (What is this?) → Nee iyang / Nee maen nyang?

2. 'Nǎi' (where) → **saǐ** Yuu nǎi? (Where is it?) → Yuu saǐ?

'Bpai nai mah?' (Where have you been?) → Bpai saǐ mah?

3. Kraǐ (who) → **paǐ**

Example: Kon nee krai? (Who is this person?) → Kon nee paǐ?

4. Annaǐ (which) → **andaǐ / daǐ**

Example: Ao annai? (Which do you want?) → Ao daǐ ?

5. Mua rai (when) → **dtawn daǐ / nyahm daǐ**

Example: Jao ja bpai dtawn daǐ ? (When are you going?)

6. Tao rai (how much) → **tao daǐ / taw daǐ**

7. Naan → (how long) → **dohn**

8. Tham maǐ (why) → **bpem nyǎng**

9. Ben yang ngǎi (how is X / how about) → **ben jang daǐ**

Example: Long lian ben jang daǐ ? (How is school?)

10. Gee (how many) → **jak**

Gee mong kap? (What time is it?) → Jak mong?, Gee baht? → Jak baht?

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Part 3: Pronouns

All easy to remember

- Pom (I / me) → **kanoi** (formal)
- Chan (I / me) → **kawy** (aw sound as in 'saw' + ee, low tone)
- Kun (you) → **jaô** (falling tone – high and powerful, then let it fall)
- Rao (we / us) → **haó** (high tone, like you are uncertain/questioning)
- Puak rao (we / all of us) → **puâk haó**
- Kao (he / him) → **kao** (formal) / **pən** (informal)
- (Puak) kao (they / them) → **kaô jaô** / **puâk kaô**
- tǎh ເື່ອ (she/her) → **kao** (formal) / **pən** (informal)
- man (it) → **man** (same as Thai, no change)

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Practice: Try asking these questions in Lao.

- Which one is cheaper?
- Where is the bathroom?
- Who is that person (over there)?
- How much is this bag?
- How many km. to Luang Prabang?
- Why is the truck stopped?
- What are you listening to?
- How much is that one?
- How many gip is this?
- How much in Thai baht?
- How is school?
- Where is a good hotel?
- How much is the hotel?
- How long does it take?
- How long
- Why is it so expensive?
- What's this in Lao?

More Practice – Pronouns and Question Words.

- What country is she from?
- What ethnicity/nationality are you? (use word for 'person' with 'what')
- Where are you staying?
- Where are you now?
- How long have you studied English?
- Where does she go to school?
- Is she Lao?
- Are you Thai or Lao?
- What is my name?
- What is her name?
- What is your name?
- How much (money) do you want?
- Would you like a drink? / What will you (have to) drink?

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Part 4: Describing Things

Here is an alphabetical list of words used to describe someone or something. With this list alone, you can say all sorts of things using the personal pronouns and general rules you have now learned.

English	Thai	Lao
angry/mad	moh hǒh	sǒon (rising tone)
annoyed	ram kahn	hǔn hwǎi (rising tone)
be bad luck	chok lai	kat-lam
be out of/have run out	moht	mǔt (short as in 'put')
beautiful	suǎi (rising tone)	ngam
cute	na-rak	dta-hak
delicious	aroi	saep (a as in man, often falling tone for emphasis)
enough (sufficient)	paw	sao
fun	sanuk	muan
interested in	son jai	pâw jai
lazy	kee giet	kee kâhn
lots, a lot, very	mâhk	lai
naked	lawn jawn	gohn dtohn
old (person)	(kon) gae (a as in man)	(poo) tao
poor (person)	(kon) jon	nyâhk (falling tone)
quiet	mit	ngiáp (high tone)

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really/true	jing jing	ee lee
same (be the same)	muan gan/gap	kɯh gan/gap
scary	glua	yâhn (falling tone)
smell bad	měhn	kyǔ (rising tone)
sour	briow	som
stingy, cheap	kee-niow	kee teé (high)
stupid person/idiot	kon ngoh	bpak bpɯk
thin	kao	laoh (long vowel)
ugly	nah-gliat	kee hâi (falling tone)

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Part 5: Verbs

With this basic alphabetical verb list, you can now say even more things in Lao

English	Thai	Lao
arrive	mah tǔng	mah hâwt (falling tone)
complain	bon	jom
do	tam	het
earn good karma ('make merit')	tam bun	ao bun
go ahead, do it	tam lee	het lôht (falling tone)
gossip	nin ta	pun / wâo lap lang
hate	giat	sang
hit/crash	chon	sôn
hurry / quick!	reow-reow	wai-wai
jump	(gra)-doht	dten
lie	goh hok	ki dtũa (rising tone)
like	châwp	mak
look at	doo (hen)	bung (hen)
look for	kon hah	sawk hăh (rising tone)
love	rak	hak
match/fit/be suitable	maw	kuh
meet	pop gan	paw gan
miss someone	kit tǔng	kut hâwt

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remember	jam	juh
speak	poot	wâo (falling tone)
stop	yut	yut / yaw
take a break	yut pak pawn	sao muai
take care of	doo lae (a as in man)	bəhng
think	kit	kut
throw up/vomit	uak	həhk / (dtehk)
tired of X	bua	bpəəht (like sound oo in took but very long)
visit (go visit)	(bpai) yiam	(bpai) yáhm (high tone)
wait	raw	tah
walk	dəhn (bpai) เดิน	nyáhng (bpai)
work	tham ngan	het wiak

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Part 6: Time

English	Thai	Lao
when	mua rai	<i>dtawn dai / nyahm dai</i>
today	wan nee	<i>mûh nee</i>
tomorrow	prung nee	<i>mûh ùn</i>
What time is it?	Gi mong?	<i>Jak mong?</i>
one more time	eek krang nung	<i>eek tua nung</i>
the first time	krang râek	<i>tua lâek</i>
slowly	châh châh	<i>sâh sâh</i>
in the morning	dtawn chao	<i>dtawn sao</i>
in the evening	dtawn yen	<i>dtawn laéng</i>
at night	dtawn kûn	<i>dtawn kam</i>
tonight	kûn nee	<i>(mûh) laen nee</i>
late at night		<i>dtawn dǔk</i>

The following times are different (easier) in Lao than Thai:

7:00 pm	nung toom	<i>jeŋ móhng</i>
8:00 pm	sǔng toom	<i>bpaet móhng</i>
9:00 pm	sǎm toom	<i>gào móhng</i>
10:00 pm	see toom	<i>sip móhng</i>
11:00 pm	hah toom	<i>sip et móhng</i>

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Nouns

Some common nouns are different. I've organized them by topic.

Part 7: Nouns – Around the House

English	Thai	Lao
house	bahn	huán (high tone)
hut/shed	gra tohm /nam	tiang nǎ
door	bra-dtoo	pa-ka-dtoo
stairs	ban dai	mua ga dai
mirror	gra-jak	waen song há
broom	mai gwaht	foi
a well (for water)	baw nam	nam sang
bucket	tang	koó (high)
spoon	chawn	buang
bowl	kan	tuai
glass/cup	gaêow	jawk

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Part 8: Nouns – Nature

English	Thai	Lao
bat	kahng kaow	<i>jia</i>
cow	wua	<i>ngua</i>
crocodile	ja rak kei	<i>kei</i>
dark	mɛht	<i>sua</i>
gecko	jing jok	<i>kee giâm</i> (falling)
hill	kôhk	<i>pohn /pôhn</i> (usually falling tone)
mountain	kao	<i>pohn nyai</i>
moon	duang jan	<i>ee gûng</i> (falling)
steep	soong chan	<i>san</i>
sun	duang atit	<i>dta wen</i>

Part 9: Body & Clothes

English	Thai	Lao
foot	tao	<i>dteen</i>
shoe	rawng tao	<i>gəhp</i>

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Part 10: Useful Expressions

Hello.	Sawat dee (kap).	<i>Sabai dee.</i>
Excuse me,	Kaw tôht (kap).	<i>Tôht dăh.</i>
What's your name?	Kun Chueh arai (kap).	<i>Jâo sueh nyăng?</i>
I'm from X.	Pom mah jahk X.	<i>Kàwee mah jahk X.</i>
How old are you?	(Kun) ayoo tao rǎi?	<i>(Jâo) anyoo tao dǎi?</i>
No problem/don't bother.	Mai bpen rai (kap).	<i>Baw bpen nyăng.</i>
I don't know.	Mai roo (kap).	<i>Baw hoo.</i>
Thanks (so much).	Kawp kun (măhk).	<i>Kawp jai (lai).</i>
Who is this/that?	Nee/nan ben kraï?	<i>Nee/Poon maen pǎi?</i>
What's this called?	Annee riak wa arai?	<i>Annee âwn wăh nyăng?</i>
How are you?	Sabai dee mǎi (kap)?	<i>Sabai dee baw?</i>
How's it going?	Bpen yang ngai?	<i>Bpen jang dǎi?</i>
Have you eaten yet?	Gin kao ru yang?	<i>Gin kao lá baw?</i>
Where are you going?	(Kun ja) bpai nǎi?	<i>(Jâo see) bpai sǎi?</i>
Where have you been?	Bpai nai mǎh?	<i>Bpai sǎi mǎh?</i>
You're very pretty.	Kun suǎi măhk (kap).	<i>Jâo ngáhm lai.</i>
It's so cute.	Na-rak măhk.	<i>Dta-hak lai.</i>

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Part 10: Useful Expressions (Cont.)

Just a minute.	Deeow gawn (na).	<i>Kao nung (dəh).</i>
I don't believe it!	mai chǎa !	<i>Baw sǎa !</i>
What are you doing?	Tam arai?	<i>Het nyǎng yoo?</i>
Let's go (together).	Bpai duai.	<i>Bpai nam nae.</i>
Where's your house?	Bpáhn yoo tee nǎi?	<i>Huán yoo sǎi?</i>
OK, see you later.	Laeow, pop gan eek.	<i>Jahng, páw gan dəh.</i>
OK, good luck.	Chohk dee na (kap).	<i>Sohk dee dəh.</i>

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