

“May I help you?”

Training Manual for Tourist Information Center Staff in Lao PDR



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Introduction

Thousands of tourists visit Lao PDR every year. Most tourists who come to Laos have never been here before. Some carry guidebooks with them, but many of these guidebooks are out of date or simply do not provide enough information. Some tourists even come without a guidebook and do not have any information at all about Laos. Hence there is a need for tourist information in Lao PDR based on the fact that many tourists either have limited or out of date information or have no information at all.

It is very important that people working in the tourism industry be able to give quality information to tourists. With good information about Lao PDR, tourists will spend more time and money in the country, enjoy their travels here and tell more people to visit Laos. Without good information, tourists may not enjoy their stay and may not recommend other people to come to Laos. It is also important that tourists receive information about do's and don'ts in order to help minimize negative impacts from tourism on Laos' people, culture and environment. Your job as an information provider is therefore very important to the development of tourism in Lao PDR.

This course is designed for employees of the government and private sector businesses that give information to tourists on a regular basis. If you work at a tourism information office, a tour company's front office, a ticket booking agency, a bus station, an airport, or at the front desk of a hotel or guesthouse, this book may be useful for you.

This book will improve your ability to give information to tourists, teach you how to find answers for many common questions that tourists ask and provide suggestions on how to maintain your information office. It will not tell you everything that you need to know about tourism. Information in each province, district and site is different, and there is too much information to put into one book. This book will instead help you to understand what information is important, how to find such information, how to prepare it, and how to present it.

After completing this course you will be much better at your very important job of tourism information provider and both tourists and local businesses will thank you for helping them. Good luck!

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1 The Role of the Tourism Information Office

Why do tourists use information offices?

Tourists carry and read guidebooks, they can use the Internet to find information, they can ask other tourists for information or they can hire a tour guide to help them. So why do tourists visit information offices anyway? Here are a few reasons why tourists visit information offices:

- Information that is available in guidebooks, on the Internet or through word of mouth can be inaccurate or old. Information in books and on the Internet are usually more than one year old.
- It is easier to ask a local person who speaks English than to read the guidebook or look on the Internet
- Many people prefer to plan their travels on their own and do not want to use a tour company or tour guide
- Information in books and on the Internet can be confusing
- Tourists want to receive information from someone who is not selling anything, in order to find out what is the best thing to do or the best way to travel. Tourists want unbiased information.
- Tourists may need help with the police
- Tourists may have a medical emergency
- Tourists may need help with their visa

Can you think of any other reasons why tourists visit information offices?

What are the responsibilities of the information office?

The public tourism information office is a government office, supported by tax dollars from the Lao people. All tourism businesses, including all guesthouses, hotels, tour companies, restaurants, bus operators and others, pay tax dollars to the government, portions of which are used to support the operation of the tourism information office. It is therefore important to understand that all information at the tourism office should be unbiased. This means that the tourism information office must be fair and promote *all* tourism businesses equally.

The tourism information office should give oral information for free or at no profit and should allow tourists to choose freely from the information made available. If the tourism office tries to sell its information at a high profit or appears to favor one or more businesses, tourists will not trust the information. It will also be unfair to the businesses that are not promoted. The role of the information office is to help and support all tourism businesses and sites throughout Lao PDR.

The information office is responsible for providing the following services and information to tourists:

Transportation & Directions

- Directions to places within the local area and to other areas around Lao PDR
- Bus schedule and prices
- Airplane flight schedules and prices
- Contact information for private vehicle rental
- Road conditions

Tourism Sites

- Information on tourism sites
- Recommendations on where to go and what to do

Visas & Legal

- Information on how to extend a visa
- Help tourists contact immigration officials
- Information on the status of international checkpoint crossings
- Descriptions of laws, rules, regulations and guidelines, including do's and don'ts that tourists should be aware of

Emergencies

- Help tourists to contact medical services in the event of an emergency or health problem
- Help tourists contact tourism police and other relevant authorities in an emergency or in the event that a tourist's items have been lost or stolen
- Help tourists contact their embassy in case of an emergency
- Help a tourist translate an important message into Lao language for the purpose of communicating with police, Lao authorities, hospital staff or a pharmacy

General Tourism Information

- Provide a complete listing of accommodation facilities, including all guesthouses, hotels and resorts with corresponding contact information and directions
- Provide a complete listing of tour companies and guide services, with corresponding contact information and directions
- Provide a complete listing of restaurants and other food services available
- Inform tourists where they can buy handicrafts and go shopping for souvenirs and other things

What are NOT the responsibilities of the information office?

We can see from this list that the tourism information office has a lot of responsibilities. Is it the responsibility of the tourism office to provide the tourists with anything that he or she needs? What are the limits of the tourism office? Is there anything that the tourism office should not do?

Yes, there are many limits to the information office. It is important to understand the limits of the tourism office to understand its role and your job. Here are some of the things that tourism office is not responsible for:

- The information office is responsible for providing information on transportation but is not responsible to make bookings for tourists, unless communication in English with the transportation agency is not possible.
- The information office is not responsible for negotiating prices with any public or tourism businesses, including transportation providers, tour companies, handicrafts salespeople, or guesthouses and hotels. You can give information on prices but you do not have to negotiate prices for tourists.
- The information office should give unbiased information. Recommendations should be based on facts and not your own personal preferences. You can tell people what is available to do or where they can stay, but you should not "sell" a place, a tour or a hotel/guesthouse to them. Let the tourists choose for themselves.
- The information office may help tourists contact police, hospitals or pharmacies, but it is not your responsibility to sort out people's problems. You are not a policeman, a doctor or a pharmacist. The tourism information office does not have the power to make legal decisions, to administer medicine or give medical advice or to change or extend visas.
- If a tourist has a complaint, the tourism officer should take note of the complaint and refer the tourist to an agency that can solve the problem. However, the tourism information officer should not argue with a tourist or take sides in any matter. The information officer is responsible for making referrals and translating for a tourist but should not take sides for or against a tourist.

2 The Role of the Tourist Information Center Staff

The tourist information center staff are usually the first, and in many the cases the only, person that a tourist will speak with at your office. Tourist information center staff work at the front desk of the tourism information office, a tour company, a ticket booking agency, or at hotel or guesthouse front desk. You are the representative of the office. Tourists see you as are perhaps the most important person in the office because you are the one that they must speak with. The tourist’s impression of your office is made by their impression of you. If you are energetic, organized and provide clear information the tourist will trust your office and refer more people to go there. If you are disorganized, unprepared and provide confusing information, then the tourist will not recommend anyone to go to your office again.

You have many responsibilities. Your responsibilities are not limited to speaking English to tourists. Speaking English is a skill that you must use to complete your responsibilities. The responsibility of tourist information center staff is to deliver the services offered by your organization in the best manner possible. You have a responsibility to not only provide information but to be a friendly person who represents Lao people and culture. When you are on duty working, you must represent not only yourself but your organization. If you are working for a government tourism information office you are seen by tourists as the face of the government. If you work for a private agency, you represent the company and owner.

The manner in which you work is very important because tourists will make judgments about your organization and, perhaps, even about all Lao people based on their brief meeting with you. Please take your job seriously and remember to represent Lao people and Lao culture well.

What are the responsibilities of the information provider?

The responsibilities of the tourism information provider depend in part on the type of organization he or she works for. Tourism information providers working for a government tourism information office have the following basic duties and responsibilities:

Welcome tourists: You are the first person that the tourist will speak to, so make sure that you make the tourist feel welcome. Greet the tourist and let him or her know that you are there to help and provide information.

Assist tourists: Answer questions and offer various kinds of information and advice to tourists. This is the main task of the information provider. If your office is busy with tourists, this will take up most of your time. This is your primary responsibility; thus you should always help tourists before doing other work.

Maintain the information office: You are responsible to make the office presentable and easy for tourists to use. This will make your job of assisting tourists less time consuming and allow for more tourists to get information in less time. Maintaining the office in a clean, orderly manner also gives a good impression about your office to tourists.

Help prepare tourist information: Because you work directly with tourists you will understand very well what type of information tourists need on a daily basis. You must, therefore, help in the preparation of tourist information. Although someone else might be responsible for designing and creating tourist information, you should help out with this task by telling that person what type of information is requested most. For simple things such as phone numbers, bus schedules and emergency contacts, you can prepare the information yourself. When there is not any information available on a certain topic, for example, a map, you can create a temporary one yourself using paper and markers.

Collect feedback: You should take note of feedback, suggestions and complaints from tourists and pass them on to the relevant people in your organization. If you do not take note of tourists' comments and do not pass this information on to other people in your organization, you will not serve tourists as good as you can.

Promote Lao tourism: You must promote the positive aspects of Lao tourism and your organization. Make tourists interested to be in Laos and help them to learn about what is available here. Many tourists do not understand what is available and how to travel in Laos. You do, so tell them. You are also responsible for promoting all tourism related businesses according to the preferences and needs of the tourist.

Can you think of any other responsibilities of the tourism information provider?

3 How to Present Yourself

First impressions are everything. The way you look, the way you act, the place that you sit or stand all make an impression on the tourists who visit your office. You must make yourself available and make it easy and convenient for tourists to speak with you.

Dress

You should dress appropriately for work. Your dress says a lot about your character and about your office. If you dress neatly, tourists will believe in you and trust the information you are giving.

Choose to wear Lao style clothing if possible, as you are promoting Lao tourism. For example, a Lao cotton shirt is preferred to a Chinese factory made shirt. If people see you wearing Lao-made clothing, they might be more interested in buying it themselves. Women should dress in a traditional *sin* and top.

If you are working in an office that has a guide service, you should wear your guide service shirt to work. If you are working in an office that has a uniform, you should wear the uniform. If you have a badge, wear that, too. When a tourist sees someone wearing a uniform they immediately understand that the person is working at the office. If you wear plain clothes that you normally wear at home, tourists may not realize that you are working at the office.

Orientation

When a tourist comes into your office should you stand? Should you sit? Should you ask them to sit down? These are important questions. In a tourist information office or tour agency it is ok to sit and stay seated when a tourist comes in and asks questions. Typically at a hotel front desk, the staff stands as they must move constantly to perform different tasks. The main thing is that when you are working, you are available at your desk or the counter when the tourist comes in. If you are sitting in a different office or in the back of the office, the first impression that the tourist gets is that your office is not ready and he is not welcome.

It is not necessary to ask tourists to sit down, as most tourists want to ask only a couple questions. If you see, however, that some tourists are waiting for your help while you are speaking with another tourist, you may ask them politely to sit down and wait for a moment. Say,

"Please, sit down. I'll be with you in just a moment."

You should sit at your desk while you are on duty. If you are sitting in common chairs provided for the tourists or if you are standing outside the office, the tourists may not realize that you are working there. You can talk with other staff or friends while working, when there are not any tourists there, but you should always be at your desk.

You should also always be sitting or standing in a place facing the door where the tourists will come in. Don't sit with your back to where the tourists enter.

Preparing your desk

Your desk should be situated in a convenient location that faces where the tourists come in and allows them to easily speak with you. You should make an area clear so that tourists can stand in front of your desk and speak with you. You may put some chairs next to your desk as well so that if the tourist has many questions that they can sit down.

Your desk should be clean and organized. Ideally, your desk should be clear of all things that are not necessary for the tourists to see. Computers, typewriters, folders, books and other things that are not relevant should be cleared from your desk. If your desk is cluttered with things, the tourist will see that you are disorganized. For example, if you have a big computer in front of your desk it will be difficult to speak with the tourist. If you must have a computer on your desk, put it on the side so that when you are speaking with the tourist you will not have anything in the way.

Keep brochures and written information in boxes or stack them neatly. Put the information neatly on your desk for tourists to see. When a tourist sees a stack of brochures, they realize that the brochures are for them to take. If the brochures are spread out and not neatly placed, the tourist might think that the brochures belong to the staff and are not available to tourists. You can also put a small sign that says *"please take one"* near things that you want to give away to tourists.

If you have a map or other information that tourists frequently ask for, you can tape the information to the top of your desk so that you can easily show the information to

the tourists. Be sure to display the information so that the tourists can read it (do not turn it towards yourself because it will be upside down for the tourists).

4 Greeting Tourists

When the tourist walks into your office, you should greet him or her if you are not busy with another customer. Smile and be friendly. At first you may simply say "Sabaidee" or "Hello". If you say "Sabaidee" or "Hello" the tourist will know that you are working there and that they can speak with you.

If you are with another customer and another tourist enters the office and stands waiting for you, you can tell him or her "I'll be with you in just a moment" or "Please wait just a moment."

If the tourist comes to your desk you should ask "May I help you?" This is polite and lets the tourist know that you want to help them and that you are free. If you do not say anything the tourist might be afraid that he or she is disturbing you.

If the tourist chooses to look around the room instead of going directly to your desk, you should let them do that on their own. You do not need to follow them. Tourists will read the information on the walls on their own. If you follow them they might feel uncomfortable and may not want to read the information.

If you see that the tourist is confused you may say, "If you have any questions you can ask me" or simply "Do you have any questions?" If the tourist has questions, you should probably then get up from your seat and move to the location in the room where the tourist is standing and answer his or her questions.

5 Basics of Giving Clear Information

Your ability to provide good information depends on how clearly you speak and communicate. You can improve your ability to communicate by understanding how to use your eyes, how to use your voice and how to use materials to get your point across.

Eye contact

When speaking with people you must look at them in the eye. If you are speaking to more than one person it is important to look at everyone when you are talking. When someone comes into the office you should look at them, smile and greet them. If you do not look at them, they will probably think that you are not working at the information office or do not have time to speak with them.

You should not look down at your book when speaking. If you have to refer to written information, you should read the information first, look up and then speak with the tourist. You should give the tourist your full attention. You should stop whatever you are doing and then speak with the tourist.

Pronunciation & language

Your accent may be difficult for some tourists to understand because you do not speak English as your first language. One thing that you can do is to speak slowly. It is easier for tourists to understand you when you speak slowly. Slow down your speaking and pronounce each word clearly. For example when saying your name or the name of a place, say it very slowly because tourists will have a difficult time understanding it. All Lao words and names are new words for tourists, so they need to hear it slowly.

You should also repeat things more than once and let the tourists repeat it back to you so that you are sure that they understand the name or word that you are saying. For example, if you say “The name of the village is *Ban Ta Ong*”, repeat the word “*Ta Ong*” and then have the tourists repeat “*Ta Ong*” until they can say it correctly.

Another thing that you can do is to use simple words and phrases. If you use complicated or difficult words, tourists may not be able to understand what you’re saying for two reasons. One reason is that many tourists do not speak English as their first language and may not understand the word that you use. A second reason is that more complicated words require almost perfect pronunciation for tourists to understand.

It is better to try and explain things instead of using one complicated word to explain something. For example, if you explaining to tourists what they should bring on their tour, you might mention that they should bring a “dry bag”. Unfortunately some tourists do not know what a “dry bag” is; the word “dry” is also difficult to pronounce clearly. Instead, you might explain such as “You should bring a special bag to put your things in to keep them dry. It’s called a dry bag.” Even if your pronunciation is not perfect, the tourist will be able to understand the word in the context of your explanation.

Volume

You should speak loudly so that tourists can hear what you are saying. Although sometimes you might be shy or you might not be sure that what you are saying is correct English, you should still speak loudly. This seems like a very simple thing to do, but when you are unsure about something you will naturally lower your voice and not speak loudly. If you are speaking to a group, be sure to speak loud enough so that everyone in the group can hear you, not only the people closest to you.

6 Using Maps, Pictures and Visual Materials

You will be able to explain things easier if you use maps, pictures and other printed materials. For example, while you are explaining directions to a guesthouse, you can point to a map to show where to go. Or if you are explaining what sights there are to see you can point to pictures or posters on the wall. By pointing to the information that is posted in the information room, the tourists will understand that they can look at the information in more detail after you explain. It also means that you do not have to speak as much because the tourists can look and read along. Often tourists will not

know what information to look at or read first, so by showing them the information while you explain, the tourists become familiarized with your office.

Be sure that when you are presenting information posted on the wall that you do not turn your back to the tourists. If you do that they will not be able to hear you very well, will have to look at your back and will not be interested to listen to you. Stand to the side of the information and point to it while keeping yourself turned towards the tourist. If the information is a large poster or is posted high on the wall, you can use a stick to point to it if necessary. You should not look at the information and read it word for word to the tourist. Instead, look at the information, point to it and then look back at the tourists and speak.

You should be familiar with all of the visual materials on the office walls and with all of the brochures in your office so that when you explain the information you do not have to read it but instead can simply point to it and speak.

7 Answering the Phone

There is a special etiquette for answering the phone in a workplace. It is important that you follow this etiquette. This will make it easier for you to answer questions over the phone and will give a good impression to those calling.

The proper way to answer the telephone at your office is to simply say the name of your office.

Example: "Champassak Tourism Office"

If you speak English quickly enough, you may say

Example: "Champassak Tourism Office, may I help you?"

You should not say "Hello" only. This is what you say on your private telephone. If you do not say the name of your office, the caller will not be certain that he or she has dialed the correct number.

Remember not to ask too many questions about the caller. The caller is calling you to ask questions. Asking "Where are you calling from?" is unnecessary in most cases.

If you need to give the phone to someone else or if you need to put the phone down while you look for the answer to the caller's questions, you should say

"Please wait just a moment."

If you need a lot of time to look for the answer you should politely ask the caller to call back in a certain amount of time.

Example: "I will look for the information. Can you please call back in 15 minutes?"

Replying to questions that you do not know

If you do not know the answer to a caller's question you should not simply say "I don't know." You must be helpful even when you do not know the answer. You can suggest who the tourist might contact and give them a contact number. Or you must at least give an explanation why you do not know the information.

Example: "I don't know, sir. You might try calling the tourism office in Luang Namtha. Their number is 086-211-534."

Example: "I don't know the answer to your question, ma'am. We do not have any information on the road conditions in Vietnam. I am sorry."

Using the fax machine and email to respond to questions

If you have a lot of information to give to the tourist over the phone you can ask the tourist if you can use a fax or email to send the information. For example you might want to write down directions for the tourist and fax them the directions with a map.

If you are having a hard time understanding what the tourist is saying or if the connection is bad, you can ask the tourist to fax you his or her question.

8 Materials that the Information Office Should Have

What materials should your information office have? There is more than one answer to this question. However, most information offices in Lao PDR should have some common materials. Below is a short description of some of the main materials that you should have.

Maps: Maps are perhaps the most sought after information by tourists visiting your office. You should have a few different types of maps. A map of Laos is very useful for explaining roads, border checkpoints and orienting your visitors to Lao PDR. A map of your province is also very important. You may have to make this if you do not have a printed version. The map should include roads, names of districts and major towns, tourist destinations, distances between towns, borders and checkpoints, and major natural and cultural landmarks, such as national protected areas or important temples.

You should have a map of your town and immediate surroundings. This should be printed on a small piece of paper so that you can give it out to the tourists. This map will be useful for giving tourists directions to various nearby locations, such as guesthouses, restaurants, or the bus station. You might also have maps of other important towns in your province.

Site Descriptions: These are descriptions of major tourist sites and tours in your area. These descriptions can be large posters to put on the office walls or small brochures that tourists can take away. Site descriptions should include a short description of the site, pictures, directions for getting to the site, suggested itineraries and information on prices for visiting the site. Some site descriptions may already be available from

companies that organize tours to the site or by guesthouses or hotels located at the site. You can use these or make your own. You should also have information on different tour company services for each of the major sites.

Materials should be written with both Lao and English headings. Domestic tourism is growing and will be very important for the tourism industry in the future.

Transportation Schedules: This includes bus, boat and airplane schedules. You may want to have a large schedule posted on the wall and copied schedules that you can give to the tourists. Schedules should include departure and destination names, distances, time of departure and arrive, dates of departure, total time of travel, and prices. You should also write any special information that might be useful such as how a bus queue works. For example, you might write that the bus will leave once it is full of passengers and that the times of departure may change accordingly. You should also include information on where the departure point is (e.g. the bus station) and when and where the tourist should purchase a ticket.

Transportation schedules are often seasonal and change quite often. You should update this information frequently.

Do's and Don'ts: The Do's and Don'ts book should be made available to all tourists who visit your office. It can be given out to every tourist for free after they fill out your registration book. You should also post the Do's and Don'ts on your wall so that they can read it while they read the other information. You can add pictures and descriptions of other do's and don'ts specific to your area.

Visa & Immigration Information: You should have up to date information on the prices for extending visas, contact information for immigration offices that extend visas and a list of the nearest places that tourists can go to extend their visas. You should have a list of tour agencies that have visa extension service. You should also have a list of all of the international checkpoints in Laos, as well as a list of all of the regional checkpoints (for Lao and border country citizens only).

Making it easier for tourists to extend their visa is very important for the growth of tourism in Lao PDR and in your province. You should make this information clear and reliable so that tourists interested in extending their visa can do so with out too much hassle. If tourists stay longer in your province they will spend more money and time, which will improve the overall benefits from tourism to your area.

Guesthouse & Hotel Information: You should have a list of all guesthouses and hotels in your area. This should include information on prices, services (air conditioning, TV, which ones take credit cards etc), contact information and directions. If possible you should have pictures for each guesthouse and hotel so that the tourist can get an idea of what it looks like. This information should probably be kept in a folder so that the tourist can sit down and look through the information on his or her own.

Bank Information: You should have a list of all of the banks that change money and offer services for tourists. These services include credit card advances and exchange of traveler's checks. Credit card advance means that a tourist can use his credit card at the bank to get cash. A traveler's check is like money but is actually a check that is

issued by a bank or company. Many tourists carry these because if the checks are lost or stolen the bank will give them the money back. You should know which banks offer these services and what bank office hours are.

Private Tour Operator & Transportation: You should have a list of all private tour operators and a description of their services. You should also have information on where tourists can rent private vans, motorbikes or bicycles.

If you have information on tour companies you must have information on all companies. You must be fair and represent all private businesses, not only a select few.

Contact Numbers: You should have a list of useful numbers, especially numbers for emergencies. These should include the hospital, police, immigration, embassies, airlines, airport, bus station, boat station, guesthouses and hotels, tour companies, banks, post office, protected area office, museum, other tourism offices, and any other office that might be in charge of a tourist attraction (example: Vat Phou Conservation Office in Champassak). This list should be kept at your desk for easy referral.

Post: You should have information on how tourists can send packages and letters back home. This will include, of course, the post office but might also include private carriers such as DHL or Federal Express.

Is there any other information that you think all information offices should have or that is especially important for your office?

9 Places Where You Can Get Information

Tourists go to you for information. But where do *you* go to get the information that you do not have? You cannot possibly be expected to know everything, but you can know how to get the information that you do not know. A good information manager knows how to quickly get answers to the things that he or she does not know.

It is important to have a few sources of information so that you check to see if your information is accurate. Relying on one book or on one person's advice is risky because that source of information may not be correct or may be out of date.

You cannot anticipate all questions that tourists will ask. So you should have sources of information available to refer to when you receive a question that you have never been asked before.

Here is a list of some sources of information.

Local Sources of Information

Bus station: The bus station will of course have information on schedules of buses. The bus station will also have telephone numbers for bus companies and for other bus stations in Lao PDR. The bus station can also help you to estimate the time and distance of routes.

Airport: Of course this is where you can get information on flights schedules, airfares and booking information. You can get the telephone numbers for other airports and airlines through the airport. For example, if you need the phone number for Thai Air, you could call your local airport to get the telephone number for the Vientiane airport, where you can call ask about the Thai Air number. International airports in Laos (Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Pakse) will also have information on visas on arrival.

Transportation Association: Contact the transportation association to receive official prices for *tuk tuks* and trucks. The transportation association may have information on road conditions. It could also possibly arrange for *tuk tuks* or trucks for tourists needing their own transport. Complaints from tourists regarding prices of local transportation should be directed to the transportation association.

Boatmen's Association: This is the obvious place to inquire about boat routes, prices, schedules of boats and conditions of rivers.

Hospital: Contact the hospital for emergencies. Also contact the hospital if a tourist has questions about health or medicine. If someone is lost or missing you could call the hospital to check if the person is there.

Immigration Police: Contact the immigration police if you have questions about visas and immigration check points. If there is not an immigration police station in your town, contact the police to find the nearest immigration office in your area.

Police: The police should be contacted if tourists have questions about what places are off limits or if they have special questions about legal matters that you cannot answer. You can contact the police if a tourist has an emergency or if someone is lost or missing. The police will also likely have phone numbers for other police agencies in case a tourist needs to contact another province's police department to report lost or stolen items. The police station may also have embassy phone numbers.

Telecommunications Office: You can get information on local and national phone numbers. You can also get information on international phone codes, prices and telephone connections difficulties. You can get access to the national phone book at the telecommunications office—a very important resource.

Post Office: You can get answers to questions about how to send things abroad, such as handicrafts that tourists buy in Laos. You can also ask to find out how much packages cost to send, types of services available and how long it takes.

National Protected Area (NPA) Offices: Many tourists are interested in visiting protected areas. As this is a new activity in Lao PDR, you may not have a lot of information about protected areas. To inquire about what areas are open to tourists and procedures for visiting protected areas, contact the protected area office in your

province. If you do not have this number you may call the Department of Agriculture and Forestry. You may also refer tourists to the NPA. If a tourist has had a problem in the protected area, contact the NPA office. Also, you may refer tourists to the NPA office if they have specific requests for information about local wildlife and plants.

People refer to national protected areas using many terms, including ‘NPA’ which stands for national protected area, ‘NBCA’ which stands for National Biodiversity Conservation Area, ‘national park’, ‘park’, or ‘reserve’ or even ‘game reserve’.

Museum: Tourists may have specific questions about cultural and historical sites. You may not be able to answer all of these questions. Refer them to the museum or Department of Information and Culture for such information.

If a tourist is interested in seeing a new or different cultural, historical or natural attraction, assist them to do so. You can help support the conservation of cultural, historical and natural resources by recommending to tourists how to see them in a sensitive manner. Make sure that if a tourist wants to go to a new area that they have approval first and that they have a guide and adequate information.

Communication, Transportation and Roads Office: Contact this office when you have questions about road access and road conditions.

District Government Offices: You might receive specific questions about tourism sites, roads, guesthouses, festivals and many other things for specific districts. You can call the district government offices directly. If they don’t have the answers they can refer you other people in the district to contact.

Ticket Agencies and tour companies: Ticket agencies often have up to date information on flights, buses and other transportation information. Tour companies can answer questions related to special interests or special tour requests by tourists.

Bank: Contact the bank for up to date information on exchange rates, for asking questions about credit cards, travelers checks and money wire transfers.

Written Sources of Information

Phone Book: This simple book is very valuable. Every information office should have the yellow phone book at your desk. You can find numbers for many things throughout the country. Be sure that your phone book is up to date, as numbers change frequently. You should also check the number before giving it to the tourist.

Phone books have important numbers such as emergency numbers and domestic and international area codes at the front of the book. After that, “yellow pages” categorize things by category, such as “Airlines”, “Hotels” and “Tour Companies”. Within each category, the businesses are listed alphabetically. “White pages” list all things alphabetically by name and not by category.

Guidebooks: Most guidebooks have most of the information that tourists need. They are easy to use and well organized. You should have some of the major guidebooks at

your office. You can check the information in the guidebook with other sources so that you know which information is out of date or inaccurate.

Guidebooks have practical information about the country in the beginning and then sort information by place after that. You should look at the "Table of Contents" in the front of the guidebook or the "Index" in the back for the names of places or the specific information that you're looking for. Some guidebooks are specific for Laos, while others include information about more than one country. The most popular book is "The Lonely Planet".

Magazines and Newspapers: Newspapers and magazine have advertisements listing telephone numbers for major hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, bus services, airlines and tour companies.

Brochures: You can get a lot of information about tourism sites and availability of tourism services and products by referring to brochures printed by the government and by tour companies.

Calendars: Refer to the calendar if you need to know when a Buddhist festival or holiday is scheduled. Don't guess! There are also calendars printed for different ethnic groups which you can get through development or research organizations that work with ethnic populations.

National Tourism Statistics: You can refer to these to for information about border checkpoints or statistics that you might need.

Internet

Although you may not have Internet access at your office, you can refer to the Internet in special cases when you cannot find information in other sources. You should be familiar with the Internet so that you can refer tourists to check the sites on their own.

One common method for finding information is search using a search engine. A search engine is something that can look through the Internet for the information that you need and give you a list of Internet sites that might be useful to you. Common search engines are Yahoo and Google. For example, go to Google and type in a name of a place or thing that you want information, such as "Patu Xay". You will find a list of Internet sites that have information about Patu Xay. It might take you time to find the information that you actually want.

Other sources

Embassies: Refer tourists to embassies for matters such as lost passports, emergencies or legal matters.

National Governmental Agencies: You should have a list of major national governmental agencies including the Immigration Office in Vientiane, Ministry of Forestry (for questions about protected areas), National Tourism Administration and Tourist Police. Refer to these offices when local offices cannot answer your questions or when you need to find contact information for another province or district.

Development Projects: Tourist may have specific questions about Laos that you may not be able to find in books or by asking the typical sources. Many development projects have volumes of material about Lao PDR. For example you could check with organizations such as Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) or World Wildlife Fund (WWF) if you want specific information on a protected area or wildlife. Rural development projects often have good information on road conditions as they use remote roads quite often.

10 Registration Books

It is a good idea to keep track of who comes into your office by asking all visitors to register their name in a registration book. If you do this you can keep statistics on what kind of people visit your office and what they are interested in. Most tourists will have no problem writing their names, nationality and reason for coming to the information office because they are getting information for free.

How to make a registration book

A registration book can be very simple and cheap. You should use a large, accounting-size notebook. Cut the top section of the paper so that you can see the inside of the front and back covers of the book. Make the following columns: number, date, first name, family name, nationality, age, comment and reason for coming. Make sure that the column for “comment” is large enough so that tourists can write at least one sentence. The column for “reason for coming” should also be big enough to write at least two or three words. You can fill in the number on the left (1, 2, 3, 4...). On the outside cover you can write in English and Lao “Registration Book” and the date that you start using it.

Using a registration book

The registration book should always be open and placed on the counter where you speak with tourists. This will ensure that they see it and that you don’t forget to ask them to fill in their information. You should ask the tourist to write their names in the registration book after you finish giving you information. Tourists will be happy to give you this information after they have received information from you. You should always have a pen ready for the tourists to use. When asking the tourists to fill out the registration book you can simply say

“Can you please write your name in our registration book?”

After the tourist finishes filling out the registration book you can give the tourist any free information that you may have, such as a Do’s and Don’ts book or a name card for the information office.

Also, you should fill in the reason why the tourist came in. Just write something short. You do not need to write a long sentence. Write something like “map”, “bus schedule”, “tour booking”, “emergency”, “guesthouse” etc. If you write short descriptions it will be easier to summarize this information later. A tourist can have

more than one reason for coming, so you can write more than one reason. You can also let the tourist write in their reason for coming in.

Everyday you should fill in the dates on the new page and draw lines for new columns. If the book is finished, you should write the last date on the front of the book and file it with other used registration books.

Summarizing statistics from the registration book

You should summarize the information in the registrations book once per month. You should first count how many people visited the information office during the month. Next you should count how many people of each nationality came. You can summarize this statistic as a percentage, by dividing the number of each nationality by the total number of visitors during the month. You can summarize age by writing down the youngest age, the oldest age and the average age. You can make the average by adding all of the ages together and dividing by the total number of people who visited during the month.

For summarizing the reasons for coming you will have to read through all of the reasons and make a list of categories. Then add up how many tourists came for each reason. You can summarize this like a percentage just like nationality.

You should summarize the main comments that people had. You do not have to write all of the comments but you can write down a description of some of the comments that many of the tourists wrote. If only one tourist made a certain comment, you do not have to write that down because it is not a common comment.

Your summary might look like this:

Summary of Visitors in March 2005	
Total Visitors	89 (average 4.5 per day)
Age	Low 18 High 62 Average 33
Nationality	UK 27% (24) German 25% (22) French 22% (20) Dutch 8% (7) Thai 7% (6) USA 5.5% (5) Canada 5.5% (5)
Reasons for coming	Map 50% (45) Bus schedule 25% (22) Tour booking 10% (9) Emergency 1% (1) Guesthouse 20% (18) Other 15% (13)
Comment	Very good (20 people) Need better information (20 people) Staff needs to study English (10 people) No comment (30 people)

11 Maintenance and Upkeep of the Information Office

Your office should be kept in order and organized. This will make it easier for tourists to find information and will give a good impression about Lao tourism facilities.

Brochures should be placed on racks or small stands to keep them organized and encourage tourists to take the information. Piling brochures on a desk often looks messy and may not look like the information is available for taking.

Posters and information posted on the walls should be straight and should be organized in a logical order. For example, transportation information should be kept together, site descriptions should be kept together etc. Avoid putting too much information up on the wall or putting the information too close to each other. This makes it difficult for the tourists to find the information that they need. You should also put headings above the information groups so that tourists can easily see where the information is located.

Be sure that all information on the walls and in the office is up to date. Take down any out of date information. Also take down any information that is duplicated somewhere else in your room. Out of date or duplicated information just clutters your room and makes it difficult for the tourist to find the information that he is after.

Common desks or tables that are for visitors to use should be kept clear of materials that are not for visitors. Keep your personal or work papers and books off of common tables. You can keep tourist materials on the common table but make sure nothing else is there. Table tops and desks should be washed and wiped regularly.

Keep food and drinks out of the information office if possible. If you must eat in the office, clean up after you eat and put away the dishes and glasses.

Books and magazines that you make available to visitors to read in the office should be labeled stating "DO NOT REMOVE" or "READ IN OFFICE ONLY" so that the tourists do not take them with them. You should make a bookshelf for books and magazines. Do not stack books in a book shelf. Put them in the shelf upright so that you can read the title on the binding of the book or magazine.

If you provide water or tea for tourists when they come in, make sure that you always give them a clean glass. Tourists do not like to share from a glass that many people have used before them. After the tourist uses the glass, clean it. You may need to buy a few extra glasses.

Annex A: Self Evaluation of Your Information Office

1. What information do you have available to tourists? (check or circle)

Map of Laos Map of your province Map of your town
 Map of other towns Site descriptions Tour Information
 Bus schedules Airplane schedules List of important contact numbers
Descriptions of guesthouses/hotels Written visa/immigration information List
of tour companies Other:

2. What written information do you have available to tourists to take away?

Map of Laos Map of your province Map of your town
 Map of other towns Site descriptions Tour Information Bus schedules
 Airplane schedules List of important contact numbers Descriptions of
guesthouses/hotels Written visa/immigration information List of tour
companies Other:

3. What additional information do you think that you should have?

4. What are the three most common questions that tourists have?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

5. What can you do to improve your ability to answer these questions?

6. Do you use a registration book? YES NO

7. Do you give out Do's and Don'ts to tourists who visit you? YES NO

8. How organized is your office?

- a. Very organized
- b. Ok, but a little messy in some places
- c. Not very organized
- d. It's a mess

9. How often do you update your information?

- a. Every year.
- b. Every two years.
- c. Only when we have new information.
- d. We never update our information.

10. Do you think that your office is useful to tourists? Why? Why not? What do you think that you need to do to improve your information office?

Annex B: Sample Registration Book

No.	Date	First Name	Family Name	Nationality	Age	Male/Female	Information Needed	Comment
1	04/04/05	Fred	Georges	USA	61	MALE	MAP	Thank you. You were very helpful.
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								
11								

50 QUESTIONS THAT YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

1. What is the meaning of the name of your province?

2. Name 10 important tourist sites in your town?

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

3. Name the main ethnic groups in your province.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

4. Name two high end hotels in your province

Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____
Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____

5. Name two mid- range hotels/guesthouses in your province

Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____
Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____

6. Name two low end guesthouses in your province

Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____
Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____

7. Name two high end hotels in Vientiane

Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____
Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____

8. Name two mid- range hotels/guesthouses in Vietiane

Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____
Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____

9. Name two low end guesthouses in your Vientiane

Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____
Name_____	Tel_____	Price_____

10. List all of the phone numbers for all of the bus stations in each district in your province:

District Name	Bus Station Phone Number

11. List the phone numbers for provincial bus stations in all of the provinces neighboring your province:

Province Name	Bus Station Phone Number

12. Fill in all of the major destinations in your province and fill in the schedule for each bus route.

From	To	Time of Departure	Time of Arrival	Price

13. Fill in the table with telephone numbers for your area

Place	Phone Number
Lao Aviation (reservations)	
Lao Aviation (check in)	
Bank (BCEL)	
Bank (one other)	
Post Office	
Lao Telecomm (phone)	
Lao Telecomm (fax)	
Internet shop (one)	
Tourism Office	
National Tourism Authority Information Office	
Immigration	
Museum	
Bus Station	
Police	
Boat Station	

14. List all of the guesthouses and hotels in your town

Guesthouse	Telephone	Price

15. Write in the office hours for the places in your province:

Name	Weekdays		Saturday-Sunday	
	Open	Close	Open	Close
Lao Telecomm				
Internet shop (one)				
Lao Aviation				
Post Office				
Bank (BCEL)				
Bank (one other)				
Immigration				
Bus Station				
Boat Station				
Museum				

16. What number do you have to dial before making an international call? _____

17. How much does it cost to make the following calls:

1. Israel 1 Minutes x _____ = _____

2. India 1 Minute x _____ = _____

18. What nearby villages sell handicrafts? What do they sell?

Name of Village	Types of Handicrafts

19. What are the major stores that sell handicrafts in your area?

Name of store _____

Phone _____

Name of store _____

Phone _____

Name of store _____

Phone _____

Name of store _____

Phone _____

Name of store _____

Phone _____

20. Name three people who have "songtaews" for rent in your area:

Name _____ Phone _____

—
Name _____ Phone _____

—
Name _____ Phone _____

21. Name two people who have mini vans for rent in your area:

Name _____ Phone _____

—
Name _____ Phone _____

22. Name two places that have motorbikes for rent in your area:

Name _____ Phone _____

—
Name _____ Phone _____

23. Name two places that have bicycles for rent in your area:

Name _____ Phone _____

—
Name _____ Phone _____

24. Write 10 major locations in your area and find prices for renting a "songtaew" to each area (one way):

a. Place _____ Price _____

b. Place _____ Price _____

c. Place _____ Price _____

d. Place _____ Price _____

e. Place _____ Price _____

f. Place _____ Price _____

- g. Place _____ Price _____
- h. Place _____ Price _____
- i. Place _____ Price _____
- j. Place _____ Price _____

25. Can you change money on Saturdays and Sundays? _____

26. Emergency Phone Numbers

Place	Phone
Police	
Hospital (Local)	
Australian Clinic (Vientiane)	
Mahasot Hospital (Vientiane)	
Mitapap Hospital (Vientiane)	
Nearest Hospital in Thailand	
Australian Helicopter Company (Vientiane)	
Australian Embassy	
US Embassy	
French Embassy	
German Embassy	
Thai Embassy	
Japanese Embassy	

27. What embassy is responsible for European citizens who's country does not have an embassy in Lao PDR? _____

28. Name all of the member countries of the European Union

29. What embassy is responsible for helping citizens from English speaking countries other than America?

30. What are the names of the four countries that speak English (other than America)?

31. In the box below, list four major ethnic groups in your province and list two taboos for each:

Ethnic Group	Taboos
	1. 2.
	1. 2.
	1. 2.
	1. 2.

32. What is the name of the national protected area (NPA) in your province? _____

33. How big is the NPA? _____

34. How many villages are in the NPA? _____

35. Name three important mammals in the NPA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

36. Name two important reptiles in the NPA:

1. _____
2. _____

37. Name three important bird species in the NPA:

1. _____
2. _____

38. List all of the activities that tourists can do in the NPA:

39 What kind of animals can you see in the NPA and where?

Name of Animal	Place to see them

40 Can tourists go to the NPA alone or do they have to have a guide?

41 What should tourists take with them on a tour?

42 Is there malaria in your province?

43 What should tourists do to prevent malaria?

44. Fill in all of the major destinations **by boat** in your province and fill in the schedule for each boat route.

From	To	Time of Departure	Time of Arrival	Price

45. Where does a tourist go to get the boat?

46. For each river, what are the seasons for traveling (when is there enough water to go):

Name of River	Season

47. Can a tourist get cash from their credit card at the bank?

48. What kind of cards can be used?

49. Visa _____ Mastercard _____ American Express -----

-- _____

50. Where can a tourist exchange traveler's cheques?

51. List ten interesting things that can be seen in your local museum
(if you do not have a museum in your town, list 10
historical things in your town that can be seen):

52. List all tour companies, with their tour type and phone numbers.

Name of Company	Tour Type	Phone Number