



The Plain of Jars

Phonsavan

Xieng Khuang Province, a mountainous limestone 'karst' area lying roughly midway between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, suffered badly from US saturation bombing. Most of its towns and its capital were flattened, and large craters are still to be seen.

As might be expected from a town built after the war, the new provincial capital, Phonsavan, is no architectural treasure house. However, it escaped the horrors of Soviet-style concrete box tenements that were inflicted upon Vietnam. The streets are mostly wide, paved and tree-lined.

The population of about 80,000 people includes large proportions of ethnic minority people, mostly H'mong and Vietnamese.

In the recent past, there have been a few instances of guerrilla activity in involving ethnic minority groups in the Xieng Khuang area, but all seems to be calm nowadays. There are also an unknown number of unexploded cluster 'bomblets' around Phonsavan. The danger areas are known, and if you travel with Haivenu, you'll have a specialist guide to keep you out of harm's way.

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The only reasons for visiting Phonsavan are its airport, and its proximity to the Plain of Jars. This enigmatic attraction is exactly what its name describes – a large plain dotted with massive stone jars weighing up to six tonnes, some with lids. Their origins and purpose are a mystery: theories range from extraterrestrial visitors to a now extinct race of giants.

The jars are estimated to be around 2,000 years old, but there is no organic material to enable carbon dating. Even their composition is not clear. Some jars are made from limestone, others from granite, but some appear to consist of a grey conglomerate that has led some experts to surmise that it might be a sort of ancient 'concrete' that closely resembles stone.

There are several 'jar sites' scattered over the plain. Sites 2 and 3 are generally reckoned the most interesting. Site 2 has 90 jars, and Site 3 has 150. The latter is near a small, attractive village, Hai Hin Lat Khai.

-  Homepage
-  Vietnam trav
-  Vietnam hote
-  Destinations
 -  North
 -  Centre
 -  Central
 -  South
 -  The Me
 -  Cambo
 -  Laos
 - Vier
 - Plai
 - Lua
-  About Vietna
-  Responsible

The site is impressive and indubitably mysterious, but unless you're fascinated with the 'X' Files or how the Pyramids were built, it's probably not worth the extra time needed to break your journey solely to see the Plain of Jars.

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