Village Guides Service:
Village Guides from Ban Nongboua are available for a “War Refuge Cave Tour” (1hr 15min walking for about 700m). The caves are about 1km from the village. Please note that the cave tours are facilitated by village guides, so foreign visitors please be aware that languages will be limited, and non-verbal communication will be paramount. Local knowledge is essential in caves. Those with professional non-local guides will still need to have a local guide when entering caves.

Safety:
The area is contaminated with unexploded ordnance (UXO) left over from the war.
Simple Rules to follow regarding UXOs:
• Keep to used paths.
• Follow the direction of local guides.
• If you see anything that looks like a UXO, don’t touch it

Special Warning: The cave used by Vietnamese soldiers (Tham Bing) has explosive heads visible on the ground and is structurally damaged from a bomb blast. It is not recommended to enter.

Dos and Don’ts:
When entering caves
• Please notify the village chief before entering caves.
• Strictly no taking souvenirs from caves.
• Strictly observe care where you tread in case of UXO.

When hiring a motorbike
Thakhek to Langkhang is about a day journey. The road is good on Route 12. At Langkhang the roads to villages are unsealed and there is a river crossing to get to Panop Village. There are usually villagers on standby with a boat to take you across for a small fee. It is worthwhile to pay an extra villager to take care of your bike while crossing as loosing your balance midstream will result in a submerged motorbike.
• Make sure it is roadworthy (check brakes, lights, oil etc) before you hire. Wear helmet. Speed kills
• Make sure you practice before starting your journey
• Avoid riding 2-people/per bike if possible
• Unsealed roads are slippery when wet.
• In the case of a flat tyre, look for a roadside store displaying an old tyre on a post as a sign.

Eating in Lankhang:
A number of both Lao restaurants and Vietnamese noodle shops are in Langkhang. In the restaurants if there is no menu there is usually pictures displayed.
Huangkham Inter Restaurant (020 22169420); 250m west of road junction (road to Gnommalath)
Toumkham Restaurant (020 99710119) 100m west of road junction (road to Gnommalath).

Getting there:
Langkhang is about 128km from Thakhek (and 18km from Naphao Border checkpoint). To get to Langkhang travel East from Thakhek along route 12 for 55km, then turn right at Gnommalath and continue along route 12 for 73km. Distances of villages from Langkhang: Ban Nongboua = 2.8km to village turnoff (extra 3.6km after turn-off); Ban Panop = 3.6km to village turnoff (extra 1.4km after turn-off); Ban Vangkhone = 7km to village turnoff; Ban Senphan = 10km.
Mu Gia Pass and Phanop Choke-point

Those that travelled on the Ho Chi Minh Trail are legendary for their depths of endurance, dogged persistence, and their solidarity with locals. This is one of the great human testimonies.

Mu Gia Pass is famous for being the principal entry point into Laos of the 16000km series of paths known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. It is estimated that 75% of all truck traffic, carrying supplies from North Vietnam, destined for Viet Cong revolutionary forces in south Vietnam came through this narrow valley in the Annamite Range. Nowadays, this pass is known as the Naphao/Chalo border checkpoint between Khammouane Province, Laos and Quang Bin Province, Vietnam. During the Second Indochina War this road was a muddy track low in the valley passing through stream-beds and squeezed between steep sandstone mountains to the north, and a maze of giant limestone monoliths to the south (Hin Nam No National Protected Area). Once the pass was negotiated, a further “choke-point” through limestone karsts near Phanop and Vangkhone proved to be the narrowest constriction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This constriction caused this area to be one of the most heavily armed sites, and in-turn, the site of most concentrated aerial bombardment on the trail.

The view from the Naphao border checkpoint road enables a spectacular view of the Ho Chi Minh trail. Imagine the noise of trucks struggling through the muddy valley below; the intense bombing and the frenetic reparations to the road enabling traffic to continue along the trail virtually uninterrupted. In this area the landscape still bears witness to the unprecedented aerial bombardment through bomb craters still visible after 4 decades. Each villager who lived through the war here has a story of an epic struggle for survival that has remained largely unacknowledged. Visiting this area provides an unforgettable experience and honour mixing with those villagers who survived in this, their home.

Hin Nam No National Protected Area

The spectacular limestone labyrinth along the border seen to the south of Naphao road is the 82,000ha Hin Nam No National Protected Area. The rugged landscape directed the Ho Chi Minh trail to the west and further into Laos. Nowadays rare primates and hornbills are amongst the wildlife that still occupy this refuge.

Ban Nongboua

A village with a free standing limestone outcrop which was passed by many thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers on foot, bicycle, or truck. This limestone outcrop housed hundreds of local villagers, North Vietnamese and Phathet Lao troops at any one time during the war period. Two larger caves gave shelter to villagers. In one of them (Tham Nam) a chimney-like passage goes for about 100m, right through the base of the outcrop and into another cave on the other side that was occupied by Vietnamese soldiers. These soldiers shared their rice with the villagers who couldn’t plant or harvest any rice for a 9-year period. Nowadays it is forbidden by villagers to go through the tunnel, as the limestone is still unstable after the Vietnamese soldier’s cave took a direct hit, shattering the limestone structure and making the sides of the tunnel weak in places. Always be aware that there is also a danger of unexploded ordinance (UXO) in all these caves.

Ban Phanop:

Located at a ford on the Nam Ngo River. The legendary trail crossed through this village. The cobblestone-paved river-banks and sections of road in the village attest to this. This village is the site of the largest search and rescue effort by US forces during the whole Vietnam War period. In 1969 a Phantom F-4C was shot from the sky. The two American airmen ejected and landed each side of the river. One was picked up on the 3rd day (for more information google “boxer 22 Phanop”). From 1984, the village school used the wing-tip of what is thought to be from “Boxer 22” as a black-board for a period of 10 years. The F-4C wingtip has come to rest in the temple grounds in Ban Phanop.

Ban Vang Khone

This village was re-established in an area of overlapping bomb craters. As you enter the village, you won’t see any paddy fields. There are only fish ponds, and buffalo pools here. During the dry season vegetables are grown in the moist depressions still evident after 40 years. One can only wonder; “surely this must be the most bombed place on earth”. Caves used for shelter during this time are located over the river and about 2km away. They include Tham Peow Maa soldier’s cave and Tham Peow Khong water cave.

Ban Senphanh

People here are famous for their scrap metal collection skills. They have even devised metal detectors that can be used under the water in the river that flows past this village. Risks faced by these villagers to earn a basket of sticky rice are unfathomable. One family has incorporated the metal war-time ordinance into their house, while others have sold direct to Vietnamese traders. See if you can detect the house clad with flattened aluminium cluster bomb dispensers. A ladder made from the tubes can be seen leaning against the veranda. These tubes were dropped off planes after CBU 14 and SUU 14 cluster bombs were dispensed. The presence of these tubes, are an ominous reminder that this area is likely to be littered with anti-personnel cluster bombs that are yet to explode. The work of organizations like UXO Lao, and humanitarian organizations like MAG to disarm the countless dangers still lurking on the ground goes on to this day, particularly in this, the most bombed place on earth.