



## Don Det - Don Khon (City)



**Champasak Province**

**Laos**

**Lat.: 13.975872993 - Lng: 105.920051575**

**Timezone: - GMT +02:00**

The Don Det – Don Khon (sometimes spelt Don Deth – Don Khone) railway was a seven kilometre (4.34 mile) long, 600 mm (1 ft 11 5/8 in) narrow gauge portage railway located on Don Det – Don Khon islands, part of the Siphandon (sometimes spelt Si Phan Don) or Four Thousand Islands archipelago in Champasak Province, southern Laos. Built by the Mekong Exploration Commission, the railway was operated by Lao State Railway authority, opening in 1893 and closing either in 1940 or 1949. The railway was initially laid to 600 mm (1 ft 11 5/8 in) narrow gauge; later it appears the railway was partly or wholly converted to (possibly) 1,000 mm (3 ft 3 3/8 in) metre gauge. The railway aided the transportation of vessels, freight and passengers along the Mekong River. The Don Det – Don Khon islands railway held the title for the only railway ever built, opened and operated in Laos until 2009, when a railway was opened between Nong Khai, Nong Khai Province, Thailand and Thanaleng Railway Station, Dongphosy village, near Vientiane, Laos.

### History

### Background

The French colonial administration of Indochina was determined to exploit the Mekong River to aid a route into China, and in doing so help counter British colonial expansion in Upper Burma. The Governor of Indochina saw the Mekong as 'the main point of connection between the different countries of French Indo-China (Cochin-China, Cambodia, Laos and Tonkin), which will be able to communicate with each other through it'. However, the key obstacle lay in southern Laos, where at Siphandon Islands, the river splits into numerous channels forming formidable rapids collectively known as the Khon (or Khone) Falls. Attempts in 1891, 1892, and 1893 to scale the falls failed; there are accounts of steamships 'engines roaring and boilers near bursting, with hundreds of men hauling from the rocks on ropes and others pushing from the decks with pikes', and one vessel 'allegedly wriggled up a narrow water-slide to within fifty metres of the top before the attempt had to be abandoned'.

Thus, alternatives modes of transport had to be found. One idea came in the form of a British tidal expert resident in Siam, Herbert Warrington Smyth, who suggested, perhaps half-cynically, that a tramway or a canal with a series of locks should be built around the falls. The latter, he reckoned, 'would satisfactorily cripple the French economy, costing about the same as the Manchester Ship Canal yet never carrying more than one ten-thousandth of its tonnage'. The French duly settled with a small portage railway across the island of Don Khon and later Don Det Island. This

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