

Trip Review



Laos Odyssey Review

By Will Weber, JOURNEYS Director

Laos, for many Americans, still holds nuances of battlefields, bombs and missing soldiers. But the people of Laos have consigned the most recent war to a long history of wars stretching over thousands of years. Paradoxically, Americans, more so than any nationality, are welcome again, almost like the prodigal son returning. There is nothing to fear and everything to learn.

Laos People & Democratic Republic

Lao People's Democratic Republic, referred to locally as just Lao, or in writing or addresses as Lao PDR, preserves a quiet, friendly, Asian elegance. Only now emerging from the political and economic shock of the Vietnam War, Lao is going to change and modernize quickly. For now you can still walk or peddle on quiet main streets with few cars. You can stay in a good hotel that does not have TV or telephones. You can step back in time to visit traditional cultures preserved from the homogenizing influences of technology and large-scale economic development. It is an exotic but easy place to feel comfortable.

I flew on a Thai Airways flight from Bangkok to Vientiane. My host from Lao Travel Service, had arranged for me to get my visa on arrival. With the right paper work in place, this proved to be a very simple process. My guide Mr. Geng, met me in advance of the immigration and took care of all the details in a matter of minutes. The airport was almost eerily quiet. Lao people speak in soft, gentle voices and seldom shout.

Throughout Laos I experienced this style of polite respectful discourse that is noticeably distinct in tone and volume from what one might expect in the cities of Thailand, Vietnam or the USA. description, etc write about your trip.

Visions of Vientiane

Vientiane is on the Mekong River, just across from Thailand. A new bridge crosses the river just down stream, but the Lao government has been wary of permitting Thai business interests from overwhelming the local economy. Laos has a shortage of educated and skilled people. Many fled bombs and persecution during and after the war. There is little political dissent in Laos, largely because it has been easier to leave than to fight. In purely material terms, there is not much to fight for. Lao seems to be holding back a tide of development that could sweep over the borders. People who are educated, speak foreign languages and have administrative experience are in extreme demand.



Buddhism is still prevalent in Laos, although one senses that the indifference of the state contributes to a sense of monasteries as museums rather than for active worship. Unlike temples in Thailand, Burma, Nepal or even Tibet, I sensed that religious monuments in Laos have only a marginal attraction to local people other than religious holidays. In Vientiane, I noticed a number of monks visiting the various wats we visited. Inquiring about them, Geng told me they had come from Thailand on a kind of pilgrimage. We visited both hallowed Buddhist sites

and a curious kind of Buddhist theme park with enormous concrete images from Hindu and Buddhist mythology. This includes a kind of house of horrors representing the depths of hell and rewards of rebirth on higher planes. This park is one of the most creative efforts to present Buddhism at a popular level that I have ever seen. Be sure to visit the “Buddha Park” when you visit Vientiane.

Tribal North

The next morning, Geng and I flew to Luang Nam Tha in the far north. It was a long flight, mostly over thick forest. Landing at the airport, I appreciated that we were, indeed, in a remote place. There were a few motorcycles and three-wheeled Lambro tuk-tuks, plus an occasional pickup truck. We hired a tuk-tuk to take us to our hotel, the Oudomsin. The Oudomsin was an unpretentious place built of rough hewn lumber, corrugated metal and old posters. There were mosquito nets over the beds. A very simple, but private, Asian-style toilet was attached to the back of each basic rectangular room. The hotel was noticeably lacking in any sound insulation and the electrical generator was shut off at 11 PM. The town was an informal place and there were quite a few people wearing tribal dress, especially in the market. I posed in a picture with one lady and there was hysterical laughter at the ridiculous discrepancy in our heights.

Luang Nam Tha was the scene of heavy fighting during the war and there were still scattered gun and tank relics around. Laos was the most heavily bombed country during the Vietnam War. More tonnage of explosive landed in Laos than was used in all of World War II. I understood that before the war this area had a much larger population. There are a few good roads and extensive forest in this area. Unfortunately, many of the ethnic minorities of Laos still practice slash and burn agriculture and hunt extensively with home made rifles.

Simple Village Life

We took a four hour walk from the edge of town to visit two minority villages, Ban Namchang (Lao Houei tribe) and Ban Nikom (Lao Tung tribe). Geng knew the villages and they seemed comfortable with our visit. I was impressed with how healthy the people looked and at the same time by how little they owned. In Ban Namchang we entered the largest hut in the village. Two related families lived inside a house which was about 30' X 100' and made of bamboo and thatch. This afforded ample room for storage, two separate kitchens and some private sleeping space.



These people seemed to have little to trade and Geng said many of the villagers were off seeking work elsewhere and would return in the planting season still more than two months away. Life for those present was relaxed and casual. People patiently answered my questions. They were neither shy nor impatient. Time seemed slowed down and I realized my trip was moving too fast.

The Party (Dance) Line

That night after dinner we could hear singing and music not far from the hotel. Geng and I walked over to a major celebration honoring the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Central Committee of the Socialist Party of Laos. I was at once impressed by how many short people were gathered there. I am well over six feet tall so I am used to being taller than people around me, but here, in an area dominated by tribal minorities who are even shorter than most Asians, I felt very conspicuous. Standing at the back of a crowd of about 5000 people who were trying to see dancers and singers on a low stage 200 feet away, I quickly became a bigger attraction than the musical presentation. I think I was the only Westerner present at the event. Several students came over and tried to speak English to me. It seemed that lots of people just wanted to stand next to me. Even Geng seemed impressed by the interest I drew and he was kept busy acting as my interpreter and explaining to people who I was. Knowledge that I was an American created special, positive interest in trying to talk to me.

Up on the stage there was a curious blend of rock music with Lao lyrics, traditional dancing and a kind of promenade of local officials and spouses across the stage. One act consisted of a male military officer and five female singer-dancers in military colors and dress performing graceful choreography while singing. Geng translated the lyrics as referring to the military's love of the people and their wish that all Laos can live in peace. This was all done to a back beat of guitar and base drums while the singers worked out a kind of bop-she-bop step and hand motion routine as they sang. As a side show to the celebration there was a lot of gambling going on. Games of guessing and chance, card games, and number wheels all tempted the attendees to place a few kip on the chance to win cigarettes, a beer, or a bag of candy. Just to be sociable I played a few times. Based on the cost of a chance and the odds of winning, I could not help but feel the odds favored the players and not the house.

What impressed me most about the celebration was the orderliness. Other than the performers on stage, I saw no military or police at the event. People of many different ethnic backgrounds were present. Liquor was being sold, lights were dim and the crowd was dense. But there was no sign of disorder, drunkenness or conflict. I saw many children 3-5 years old wandering around in the crowd with no sign of their parents and no concern on the part of the kids or other adults. I have never been at a gathering in the USA where there was so much implicit trust in the goodness of human beings or in the safety of a public gathering.

I wished I would have had more time to explore this area, but we had to be off for the long trip to Pak Beng. We traveled by pickup truck over almost deserted roads. We passed innumerable tribal villages that would have been worth visiting, but we just did not have time. We finally arrived at Pak Beng on the Mekong River. The only hotel in town is a very simple place with toilets and wash facilities built on a scaffolding suspended over a cliff with a spectacular view of the Mekong River. JOURNEYS now offers this trip as our Laos Odyssey.

Mekong River



The river trip to Luang Prabang was one of the best days of my trip. The Mekong is a very substantial river even in the dry season in March and April, but there are shallow places and rocks that make navigation challenging. We chose to travel in a long diesel river boat about eight feet wide and 40 feet long. This is the most common craft on the river and the one offering the most options for comfort, photography and general observation. Geng had arranged the charter several weeks before. The boat could hold up to 10 or 12 travelers. We chose to sit on the roof for most of the journey. It would be possible to sit inside protected from the sun or rain or wind, while still observing life along the river.



Some people choose to travel by long-tailed speedboat. These craft are four times as fast, but much noisier, more dangerous and brutal on the spine. Passengers on the speed boats are required to wear helmets and life preservers.

Panning For Gold

We traveled with the current at a comfortable pace. We stopped and went ashore at one point to observe work elephants carrying logs out of the forest. At another point we stopped to observe the activities of people panning for gold in the river sands. Much of the route was through a gorge with steep, forested sides. In the relatively low water, dramatic rock formations of ancient bed rock sometimes surrounded us. All along the way we saw many people fishing or washing. Some of the seasonal sand bars were cultivated with melons or tomatoes.



Pak Ou Caves

From the river we could observe numerous caves and grottos in the limestone cliffs. Many of the caves are inaccessible. Two very large ones, the Pak Ou caves, Tham Thing and Tham Phum, are among the most famous pilgrimage sites in Laos. The caves are filled with Buddha statues accumulated over hundreds of years. I was told the most valuable of the statues from the cave have been taken to Luang Prabang for safe keeping, but thousands remain in a very impressive display. The site is tended and a nominal admission is collected. While I was told the caves are a popular pilgrimage and picnic destination, our small party were the only visitors on this afternoon.

Re-boarding the boats we traveled a few kilometers farther down the river to the village of Ban Xang Hai, an ancient village now noted for the quality of local fermented spirits, lao-lao, the residents produce. Hundreds of large clay jars stood in the river banks in the afternoon sun aging to the tastes of down river consumers.

Luang Prabang

A few kilometers farther down the river Luang Prabang came into view. Several temples are right on banks and as we landed below one of them a line of twenty monks in orange robes ascended the stairs above us. Geng and I climbed the stone steps to find ourselves at the center of the city. It was just a short walk to the New Luang Prabang Hotel. Indeed, it is a short walk to just about any of the sites of Luang Prabang. The city has a population of only about 8,000 people and there is a sense of space and order and antiquity that gives you a feeling of sanctity. In fact, the general area has lost population since the war. I was surprised to find at least four very nice hotels. All have been or, are being, restored with a French Colonial architectural motif featuring ornate terraces, outdoor dining and elegant woodwork. I regretted having only one night here. The city, the Palace Museum and the temples deserve a more leisurely exploration on foot. In my entire trip, no other location concentrated so many interesting and varied sites in such close proximity. There are more than 30 temples remaining of the 66 that existed before the French colonization. Many of them are quite active, ornate and well-maintained. We made an early morning climb of Phu Si. The view of the city, surrounding mountains and the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers alone is worth the climb, but you can also observe the ruins of a six-hundred year old temple (Wat Pha Phuthabaat) and a rather odd image garden on the top of the 100 meter high peak. Relics of the war on the hill include a Russian anti-aircraft gun and bomb casings converted to flower pots.

Royal Palace Museum

We walked from Phu Si to the Royal Palace Museum, arriving as it opened. This spacious building was built in 1904 for King Sisavang Vong. When he died in 1959 his son ascended to the throne. When the Pathet Lao seized control of the government, the young king was imprisoned in a cave where he died. The palace was converted to a museum.



You will see stunningly beautiful Buddha statues including the Pha Bang, 83 centimeters tall and made of solid gold. The museum also contains impressive murals and diplomatic gifts that lend insight into the style and generosity of governments and heads of state toward the late monarchs. If you see nothing else in Laos, take time to visit and reflect on the Royal Palace Museum. It is a special place.

Weavers' Village

Before leaving, Geng took me to a small village, Ban Phanom, on the outskirts of Luang Prabang. This village is noted for silk and cotton weaving. I am not especially knowledgeable about textiles, but I have observed and priced them all over the world. I found the quality and the patterns here very impressive. They were extremely inexpensive for beautiful work. I ended up spending more of my souvenir budget here than at any other point of my trip. The young women who made and sold the weavings were very friendly and eager bargainers.

Visit Laos Soon

I left Laos with many positive impressions. Everywhere people were very friendly, respectful and polite. I enjoyed my brief contacts with the tribal groups of Laos and if I were to visit again, I would take a lot more time for this aspect. I appreciated learning about the history of Laos both as a context for understanding the Vietnam war and for understanding the contemporary attitudes and politics. While my own background makes it hard to appreciate the revolutionary struggle still idealized in government rhetoric and social policy, I still felt that the leaders of Laos are well-meaning and determined to negotiate the best deals for their country, even if that means meeting the capitalist investors of Asia, Europe and America on their own terms.

