



LOVELY LANDLOCKED LAOS

Travelling the country's bumpy roads can be a pain, but it offers several spectacular surprises.

THE PLANE TOUCHES DOWN in late evening in a landlocked country the size of Great Britain, 70 per cent of whose geography is mountainous and whose population numbers six million – only a million more than that of tiny Singapore, from where we had flown.

I have arrived in Vientiane, the most accessible entry point into Laos.

Opting for flexibility on this trip, my companions and I rent a minibus with a driver. At dawn, we begin our journey north to Vang Vieng.

VIBRANT VANG VIENG

Vang Vieng has changed dramatically in the last two years. Its governor, not wanting it to become another sleazy Asian town, has acted to clean it up before it was too late.

Instead of being famous for drugs, drunks and backpackers, this scenic location on the Nam Song River now attracts families. You can enjoy tubing and kayaking on the river, and get a drink in town.

Vang Vieng's centre is a little better than a shanty town. There are three main streets with pubs, restaurants, souvenir shops and tour agencies offering adventure activities: bicycle or motorcycle jaunts, rock climbing, kayaking, caving, rafting and of course tubing, plus various combinations of each.

The pubs and restaurants are relatively quiet except for background music, or TVs bizarrely playing reruns of the American soap *Friends*.

My friends order a "bucket", comprising a potent mix of local whisky, Coke, Red Bull, lime, honey and ice, which they drank through straws. I prefer a

nice cold glass of Beerlao. And while Laotian cuisine has not won any mention in the Michelin Guide, the sticky rice with spicy chicken *laap* that we partake of is delicious.

KARST LANDSCAPE

Morning comes around, and we eat a breakfast of fresh baguettes and scrambled eggs before strolling to Vang Vieng Resort alongside the river for a look at the dramatic karst landscape, formed from the dissolution of soluble rocks like limestone, dolomite and gypsum. I spend at least an hour on a bright or-

ange suspension bridge, admiring the formations and watching fishermen cast their nets while small boats go up and down the stream.

BLUE LAGOON

Blue Lagoon is accessible by bicycle, motorcycle or car. Thankfully, we choose the latter – the unpaved rural road is quite rocky and very dusty. Several cyclists complain of punctures and sore bottoms during the 7km ride.

The lagoon itself is something of an anticlimax but the water is bluish and there were a lot of fish to feed. Younger



1 Long-tailed boats moored on the Nam Song river in Vang Vieng. 2 Sport activities on the Nam. 3 Colourful tents in front of a limestone mountain in Vang Vieng.



tourists jump into the water from high branches and swing from ropes into the stream, screaming as they do. We are not exactly one with nature, but the cave jaunt is fun, the water refreshing and our picnic enjoyable.

PLAIN OF JARS SITE 1

The mysterious, huge stone vats at the Plain of Jars in central Laos, which will surely see a surge in visitors as the country's infrastructure continues to improve, takes almost five hours to reach by car from Vang Vieng.

The roads are fine, a little bumpy in places, but quite free of traffic. Villages comprising simple wooden houses, assorted animals and markets keep the journey interesting. The mountainous scenery is amazing.

Nearing Phonsavan, the town closest to the Plain of Jars, we are surprised to see a group of Hmong girls in full New Year dress practising courtship games. After a quick photoshoot and exchange of smiles we continue on to Thong Ha Hin, known for simplicity as Site 1 of the Plain of Jars.

This is the cluster closest to Phonsavan and we soon arrive at the carpark with its small cafe and souvenir shop. Spoons, bracelets and necklaces made from recycled bomb casings and shrapnel are on sale.

The ancient jars remind me of the stone circles in Britain, and they continue to baffle historians who are uncertain of their exact age, purpose or how they were transported there. Hypotheses include them being used to store

wine, as celebratory "medals" for victory in battle, or perhaps as 2,000-year-old Neolithic coffins, as French archaeologist Madelaine Colani believed after studying the area back in the 1930s.

A DEADLY REMINDER

It is sobering to read the sign by the entrance warning visitors to keep to marked tracks to avoid triggering unexploded bombs, and to see bomb craters.

This whole area had been heavily targeted by American bombers in the CIA's "Secret War" against the North

- 4 Cave tubing at Tham-nam, near Vang Vieng. 5 Some of the mysterious huge stone vats in the Plain of Jars. 6 Hmong girls in traditional dress. 7 Soon, a widow from the Brau tribe, and her stretched earlobes. 8 The golden stupa at Pha That Luang.



Vietnamese operating in Laos during the Vietnam War.

As we explore the sprawling site and its approximately 250 jars, a local family, their chicken, and a few small local tour groups are our only company.

ADVENTUROUS TASTES

The horrendous high-pitched squealing of a pig, presumably being slaughtered is our wake-up call the next morning. The weather is pleasantly cool, maybe 12 deg C, and it's misty as we walk to the market.

A wide selection of fruit, vegetables and rice is available, as well as live piglets, ducks, chickens and porcupines. Rather unsettlingly, there are also dead rats, civet cats, squirrels, hornbills and mouse deer for those with more adven-

turous tastes – one hopes that financial assistance and education will remedy this someday soon.

PLAIN OF JARS SITES 3 AND 2

Moving on, we hike up the hill through rice fields and water buffalo pastures to the 150 jars of Hai Hin Laat Khai – Site 3 of the Plain of Jars. We have this remote location, where the jars are close together, to ourselves. Cobwebs, the shade of the trees, a light mist, the isolated location and my wondering if the jars were indeed former coffins give this place an eerie feel.

Next, we visit Hai Hin Phu Salato – Site 2 – and its 100 jars. One section was small and overgrown with greenery, and of particular interest was a tree that had merged with a jar. Up a small

hill nearby, we enjoy good views and examine a jar lid with what looks like a human form chiselled onto it.

CAPITAL CITY

Our trip continues with a long drive back to Vientiane. It's a large, sprawling city by Laotian standards, with a population of 800,000.

Vientiane grows on me. The city has a vibe that appeals. One highlight is a visit to Pha That Luang, the golden stupa, and the reclining Buddha next door.

Walking along the banks of the Mekong river in the late afternoon and joining the crowds who assemble to enjoy the sunset is an absolute must-do. We shopaholics then browse the night market for cheap T-shirts, bags and handicrafts, then dine at Khop



Chai Deu Restaurant, which provides exceptional value, has an excellent ambience, and is, as usual, crowded.

I take the same walk along the Mekong in the early morning and only see an occasional farmer, a few joggers and a handful of dog walkers enjoying their exercise – and the statue of King Chao Anouvong, dominating the riverbank.

DOWN SOUTH

Ethnic minorities, spectacular waterfalls, ancient monuments, the Mekong River and the cool Bolaven Plateau make southern Laos a great place to get away from it all. Pakse, the gateway to the south, is our next port of call after a 50-minute flight from Vientiane.

STRETCHED EARLOBES

We meet the cheerful Madame Soon and her relatives in Vongvilay, a minority

ethnic village near Attapeu City in southern Laos, where we spend the night after travelling from Pakse.

At 75, Soon is the oldest of the Brau women in the village. Her ivory earrings have been replaced by large bamboo studs, worn in earlobes that were stretched to accommodate them more than 60 years ago. At puberty, her adult teeth had been filed flat with a knife, and later, when she got married, her face was painfully tattooed using ink from the crushed bark of a local tree.

"I sold my large ivory earrings to the tribal traders," explains Soon, a widow, pragmatically. "It seemed a lot of money at the time. My husband, who was a good hunter, had passed away and it was difficult to earn a living growing rice, corn and manioc."

The women here spend their free time chatting, smoking pipes and drink-

ing lao hai whisky, which is made by fermenting water, rice, yeast and sugar in earthenware jars and imbibed through bamboo straws. She explains that this tribal lifestyle will disappear within a generation as the children do not want their ears stretched or faces tattooed. They prefer to get educated and find jobs in the city.

DESIGNER COFFINS AND YOUNG WATER PIPE SMOKERS

There are many other ethnic villages in southern Laos, and most welcome visitors. On our drive from Pakse to Attapeu we stop at Ban Kandon, home to the Katu tribe – animists who sacrifice buffalo on auspicious dates.

The village's community hall is symbolically decorated to represent the tribe's beliefs. Houses are built on stilts with wooden coffins stored below, as

the Katu like to prepare for death by designing their own wooden coffins and storing them until needed.

Ban Kopung Village, home to both the Katu and Alack tribes, is used to receiving tourists, but is still unspoilt. The local blacksmith is hammering away making tools, and youngsters as young as six or seven are puffing on water pipes, believing it to be good for their health. Women dry coffee, which is ubiquitous in the region, and highly fertile pigs wander aimlessly.

BEFORE ANKOR WAT, THERE WAS WAT PHOU

Looking for a change of scene, we are curious to see Wat Phou, touted as the Laotian equivalent to Angkor Wat before ending our trip by chilling out in the 4,000 islands area of the Mekong.

Set in a terrific location with lush terraced hills rising high behind it, Wat Phou is a spectacular sight, but much smaller than Angkor Wat. It is off the

9 Wat Phou, touted as the Laotian equivalent to Angkor Wat. **10** A young smoker in Ban Kopung village. **11** A resort on Done Khone island



beaten track and quite a difficult place to visit, so do not consider it unless you are physically fit.

There are hundreds of steep steps to climb from the two main palaces to the small central sanctuary, which has modern images of Buddha in it. Formerly a Hindu temple and built 1,000 years ago, Wat Phou has intricately carved images, created by master craftsmen, surrounding it.

FOUR THOUSAND ISLANDS

Done with our more strenuous adventures, it is time for some rest and relaxation. We take a 30-minute boat ride to Done Khone Island, one of the 4,000 islands in the Mekong. Buffalos dose at the edge of the water, villagers do their washing in the river, and fishermen cast their nets from flimsy boats.

Minutes after checking in, I am on a rented bicycle on my way to Liphi Waterfall – and what a lovely sight it is. It does not drop far, but is very wide, and what is surprising is at the far end, overlooking a sandy beach smack in the middle of nowhere, I can get a cold Beerlao and Wi-Fi access, which allows me to e-mail friends and let them know

what they are missing.

We have a simple breakfast as we watch life on the Mekong and wait for the boat back to Ban Nakasang; there, fishing boats are unloading their catch, their crew haggling noisily over prices with buyers.

MORE WATER THAN NIAGARA

I had not previously heard of Khone Phapheng Falls, close to the Cambodian border, but I can hear the deafening sound of rushing water from Southeast Asia's biggest waterfall (by volume).

It's impressive even in the dry season, and it must be magnificent in full flow with two million gallons of water tumbling down the falls every second – far more than at Niagara.

TIME WELL SPENT

During the drive back to Pakse airport, I reflect that Laos has much to offer. It's affordable, welcoming and different. The south appeals to those interested in ethnic tribes and a laid-back way of life; further north, Vang Vieng attracts visitors with its wonderful scenery and sports activities, and the Plain of Jars holds untold mysteries. **W**

