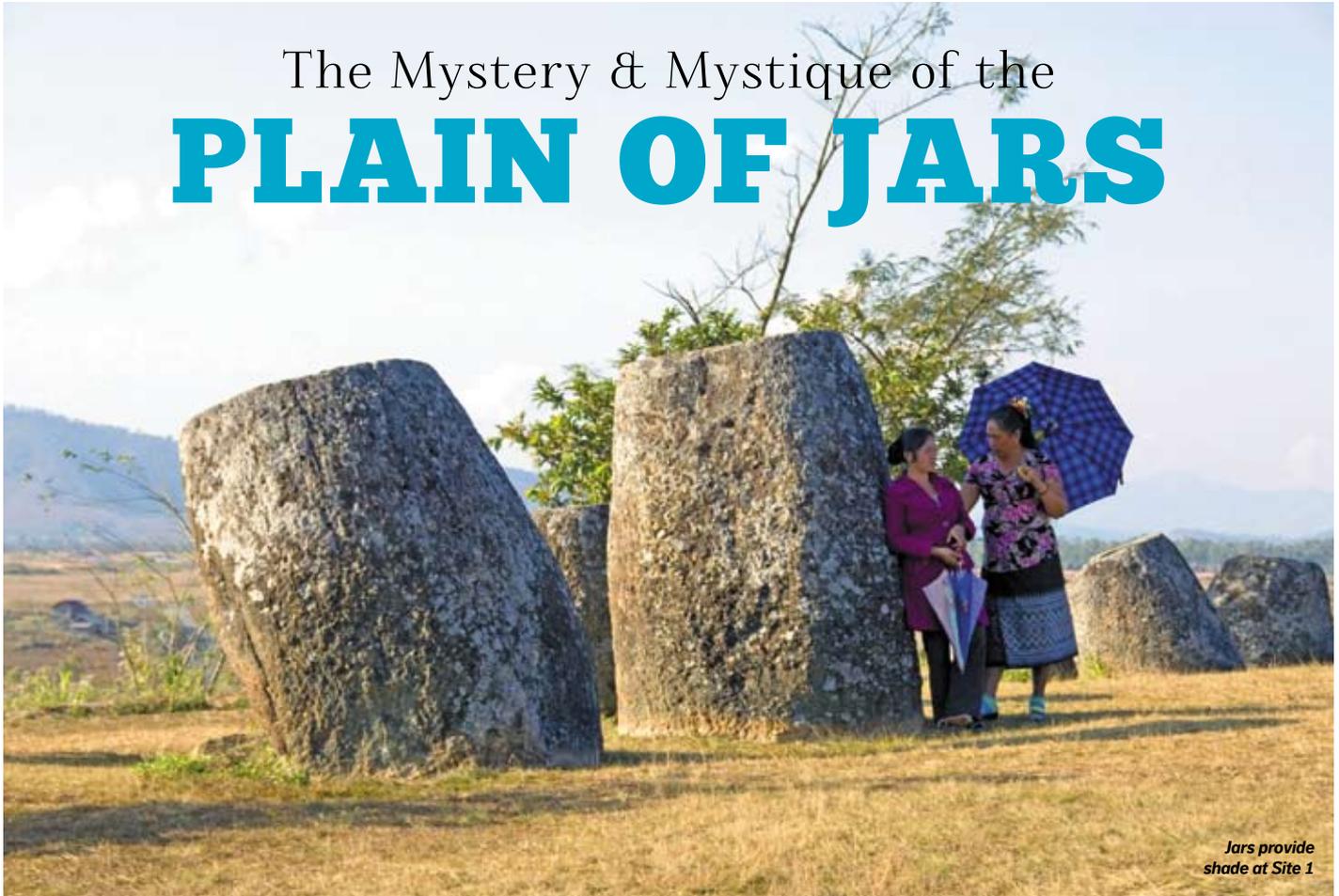


# The Mystery & Mystique of the **PLAIN OF JARS**



*Jars provide shade at Site 1*



*Hmong girls in New Year outfits*

The mysterious, huge stone vats at the Plain of Jars in remote North East Laos will surely see a surge in visitors as infrastructure improves. Fortunately for **Mike Smith** and family the sites were virtually deserted during their recent visit that left Mike wondering what ancient people had made the jars, what was their purpose and why were they at this location?



*Jar Site 2*



**T**he plane touched down in a landlocked country the size of Great Britain, 70 percent covered in mountains yet with a population of only six million – only one million more than tiny Singapore that we had just flown from. We had arrived in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, after a comfortable flight on Lao Airlines' modern Airbus 320. Getting our visas on arrival we were soon asleep in the trendy and excellent boutique hotel Salana, which is centrally located close to the vital Mekong River.

### Not so Plain Jars

Opting to have flexibility on this trip, we decided to splurge out and rent a minibus complete with driver from Europcar for our time in Laos. The next morning our driver arrived at dawn and we began the long journey to the Plain of Jars.

These ancient jars reminded me of stone circles in the UK, and they continue to baffle historians who are uncertain of their age, purpose or how they were transported there. Various hypotheses include storage for wine, celebratory "medals" for victory in battle or perhaps 2000 year old Neolithic coffins as French archeologist Madelaine Colani believed after studying the area on elephant back in the

1930's. Whatever, we were determined to see Asia's Stonehenge.

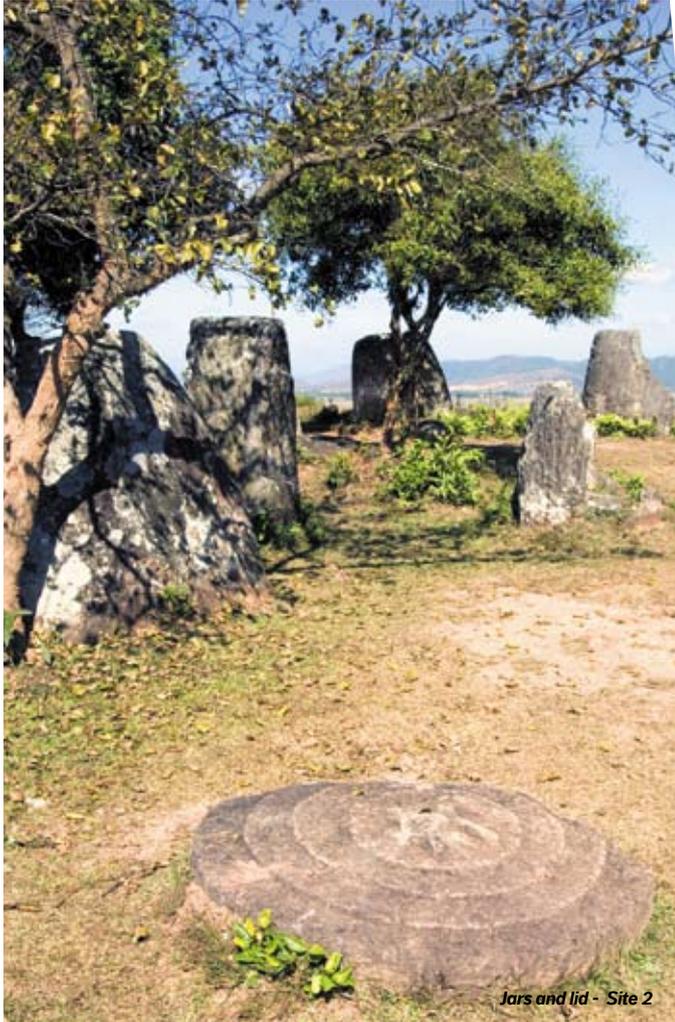
### Nearing Phonsavan

The roads were fine, a little bumpy in places, but quite free of traffic. Villages, with simple wooden houses, assorted animals and markets, kept the journey interesting. The mountain scenery was spectacular. Nearing Phonsavan, the town closest to the Plain of Jars, we were surprised to see a group of Hmong girls in full New Year dress. We knew something unusual was happening when the driver also took out his camera. The girls were standing in two parallel lines playing catch with tennis balls, practicing for a courtship ritual with boys. If a boy accepted the ball he would become the boyfriend. Facebook Laos style.

It was almost 5.30pm, but we couldn't resist heading straight to Thong Ha Hin, known for simplicity as Site 1 of the Plain of Jars. It is the site closest to Phonsavan and easily accessible on a paved road. We soon arrived at the car park with its small café and souvenir shop.

### Nearing Bombs

It was very sobering to read the sign by the entrance warning us to keep to marked tracks to avoid



Jars and lid - Site 2

unexploded bombs. This whole area had been heavily targeted by USA Air Force bombers in the CIA's "Secret War" against the North Vietnamese operating in Laos during the Vietnam War. The large number of unexploded ordnances (UXO's) is still a major problem and MAG (Mines Advisory Group) continues cleanup efforts throughout the country.

We had been warned that the Plain of Jars is a disappointment. It wasn't. The light was perfect and I got some great photos, all the while letting my imagination run wild on the possible purpose of the jars.

A local family, with their chicken, (I wasn't sure if it was a pet, or food bought at market and kept fresh for dinner later, or a prop for pictures) and a few small local tour groups were our only company as we explored the site that had approximately 250 jars. The jars were huge and great to wander around.

### Casings + Craters

A large bomb crater made me shudder.

Interestingly, the souvenir shop sold spoons, bracelets and necklaces which had been "recycled" from bomb casings and shrapnel. Hopefully, someone



will benefit and the national average wage will increase from the current \$2.00 per day.

As dusk fell we looked for our hotel in the town of Phonsavan. It was in a resort with a fairground that was, thankfully, 90 percent closed, but we did burst a balloon with a dart and win a can of cold tea! The room was huge and a bargain for the price which included breakfast.

It was time for a cold beer and dinner so we strolled the few hundred meters to the tourist friendly Craters Restaurant. The large recycled bomb shells used as decoration outside the restaurant, and elsewhere in town, are a constant reminder of the troubled recent past. The steak cooked in bamboo, satay and mixed vegetables accompanied by a few bottles of BeerLao refreshed us!

### Adventurous Taste

We were woken up by the horrendous high pitched squealing of a pig, presumably being slaughtered – no alarm clock needed! The weather was pleasantly cool, maybe 12°C, but misty so we lingered over our fried eggs and toast and delayed going to the next two jar sites.

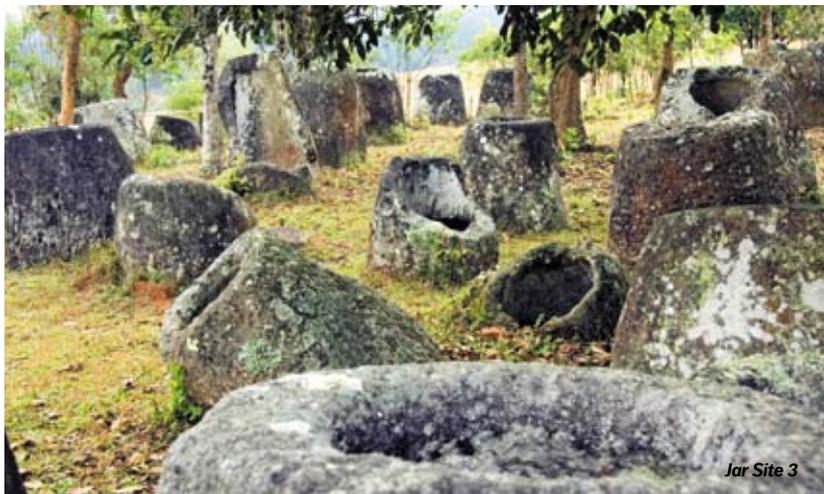
Instead we headed to the market. A very good decision as it turned out, but not for the squeamish! There was a wide selection of fruit, vegetables and rice, but also live (but not for long) piglets, ducks, chickens and porcupines, plus rather unsettlingly



Russian tank



That Phuan Stupa



Jar Site 3



Charming man at Phonsavan market

very dead rats, civet cats, squirrels, exotic birds and mouse deer for those with a more adventurous taste.

### Ruined Russian Tank

Ready for more pleasant sights, we drove to Hai Hin Laot Kai or Jars Site 3 on an unpaved, uneven, bone shaking road stopping briefly at the ruined Russian Tank for a “so what!” moment.

We parked and walked through rice fields and water buffalo pastures up the hill to the 150 jars. We had this remote site, with good views of the farmland and jars in a much more compact area, to ourselves. Cobwebs, the shade of the trees, a light mist, isolation and wondering if the jars were indeed former coffins gave this site an eerier feeling than Site 1.

### Jars Site 2

Our final visit was to Hai Hin Phu Salato or Jars Site 2. The track became too difficult for transport and we progressed on foot in the now warm day. There are two separate areas here with 100 jars. One section is small and overgrown, but particularly interesting is a tree from the jungle that had merged with a jar rather like the Tomb Raider Temple in Angkor Wat. The second, up another small hill, had good views and a jar lid with what looked like a human form chiseled into it, reminding me that once upon a time all the jars

had lids.

There are other sites with smaller numbers of jars which are more spread out and difficult access so we opted for an easy drive to Muang Khun approximately 30kms away. The town was heavily bombed and there are significant signs of destruction but as fate would have it the ancient stupa of That Phuan and a Buddha at the temple of Wat Si Phum were spared when all else was damaged.

### BeerLao

We were tired and had done enough for one day, but felt compelled to stop when we spotted a cottage craft rice noodle maker drying the noodles in the sun. Then it was back to town to wander round the museums and drink more bottles of BeerLao with dinner. BeerLao has essentially a monopoly on beer sales, but as the guide book noted – “That’s not all negative”!

We loved our stay in the Plain of Jars and look forward to reading about any new archeological research done on them. The climate in December is perfect and we were glad we splashed out on a Europcar minibus which really gave us more flexibility to get to where we wanted to.

We moved onto Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng before returning to Vientiane. [AJ](#)

### Airline

Lao Airlines  
[www.laoairlines.com](http://www.laoairlines.com)

### Hotels

Hotel Vientiane  
 Salana Hotel  
[www.salanaboutique.com](http://www.salanaboutique.com)  
 Hotel Phonosavan  
 Phoukham Garden  
 Hotel and Resort

### Car Rental

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