

Laos



map courtesy Lonely Planet

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Misbehaving Monk



Mekong River and a girl name Bildge Pump



Late start, rough night



Hmong Village



Party with the Lao Border Guards



World Trip

Laos Chapter 1 - Entering Laos and Eric's Excellent Day

July 14-15 By Eric

Laos is a poor country. One expat told us sixty percent of its national budget comes from foreign aid. The government has been described as "practical communism" (in the Lonely Planet guidebook). It allows religion (with restrictions) and a fair amount of private ownership. "Practical," however, does not imply efficient. We also heard that the government is notoriously corrupt.

We got our first taste of corruption on the Friendship Bridge over the Mekong from Nong Khai, Thailand to Laos. The bridge is only the second over the Mekong. And it's the only one between Thailand Laos. Previously all crossing was by ferry. We were anticipating riding over the bridge into Laos.



Unfortunately Laos's thick communist bureaucracy hasn't figured out the idea of a bridge. Four years after it was finished they still treat the bridge like a ferry. They wouldn't allow us to ride our bikes across. Instead we had to cram them and all our stuff onto a government-run shuttle bus. The bus carried us less than two kilometers. A ferry would have been far more convenient.

Laos customs took a long time. I had to show my passport four or five times. But no one gave us any trouble or even asked many questions.

In Laos people drive on the right instead of the left. At the Laos end of the bridge they have a cross-over with a traffic signal. This is the first time I have ever seen traffic change sides in an overland crossing. I had no problem changing back to the right side of the road. (Other than the Philippines, the last time we rode on the right was in Hawaii last October).

(Joan: Me neither. In fact, whenever we started riding in left-hand countries on roads with no traffic, I automatically swung to the right side until Eric or some truck chased me back).

Other than changing sides, the 20km ride to Vientiane wasn't too different from riding in Thailand, though the road was a little dusty and not as well paved. Also there were more people on bikes. The food stalls still had round concrete picnic tables and built-in checker boards. Kids still waved and yelled Hello. Now and then we heard a



Bonjour!!



Lumber companies, concrete companies, a steel company and other industrial plants took advantage of the bridge and set up shop along this strip. So it wasn't exactly scenic. Lots of heavy trucks and overloaded "jumbos" (pickup trucks converted into passenger buses) passed us. We also saw strangely communist-looking full-size bus with big rivets all over the hood like rhinestones.



To my surprise, lots of billboards, and we passed many, advertised in English. We saw more English and Roman transliterations in Laos than we had seen in Thailand. I suppose this is because Laos was once a French colony, while Thailand was never anyone's colony (just overrun a million times by the Burmese, Chinese and Japanese).

Entering Vientiane was underwhelming. I had expected a Communist capitol would have big monuments and impressive large buildings dedicated to the "People's Struggle" or something. Vientiane does have some of these things but not the way we entered town. Instead our road just got busier and dustier. We had no idea we were in the city center until we noticed a sign for our hotel, the Asian Pavilion. (The hotel is featured in a Jean LeCarre novel. We never read the novel but that's a big part of why we wanted to stay there).



Despite the dusty streets and disappointing entrance, maybe partly because of it, Vientiane grew on us. Unlike Bangkok, Vientiane is small and easy to get around. It also has lots of good restaurants and services because it has a large expat population. We ate excellent Indian, French, Italian and Lao food. All our favorite restaurants were within a few blocks of our hotel.



Our first full day in Vientiane was full of nothing but great news. We had asked my mom and dad to ship our tent, stove, cook set and Thermarests to us at "Post Restante" (general delivery). We figured we might need them in Laos and would need them in China for sure. I was worried about getting them. Our guidebook said incoming mail was iffy. If the package didn't come, we would have serious problems preparing for China. I wondered how long we would wait before we decided to give up and figure something out.

Amazingly the package was waiting for us and didn't take long to retrieve. The postal workers were amazingly friendly and happy. One woman was inspecting a very



large outgoing package, mostly full of weavings, when she suddenly screamed. Everyone turned and looked. She thought she had seen a giant bug. It was actually just a piece of material. Everyone laughed for a full 30 seconds.



Actually, one man didn't laugh. He was sitting upright at a desk in the back wearing a classic third world uniform--so tight it could almost be painted on. It had a distinctive greenish-reddish color (Joan: folks, Eric is partly colorblind) that says "Red Army" to me. I never saw him look up from his paperwork. He was a caricature of a Communist bureaucrat. Thankfully we didn't deal with him.



The box was packed with a newspaper and as I cleared it away I noticed a big picture of someone that looked like me. I grabbed it. It was me! The story I had emailed to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette over seven weeks earlier had finally run. It was about my experiences cycling around the world with a French Horn. The postal workers were impressed when I showed them the picture of me in the paper.

What a day. Not only had our package arrived, my story had run and my photo was plastered all over my hometown paper! I like imagining my friends having their morning coffee at work and spilling it on their laps when they opened the paper. I like the idea of my friends in the brass quintet I used to play in, and even my high school teachers, reading it. I wrote the story strictly for the money, but the fame was even better.



More good news. We checked email and a friend who had seen my Post-Gazette story wanted me to write for their magazine, at much better pay. Also, my sister Katy said she had found some photos we thought were missing.

We celebrated with a big dinner at one of the nicest restaurants in town. We had a huge, three-course meal and a carafe of wine--all for \$8.50 each.

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Laos Chapter 2 - Vientiane: Of dust, beggars and bandits

July 15-22 : By Eric

It's funny the little things you miss. Our room came with a fairly well stocked buffet breakfast. It had fruit, eggs, cereal, butter, jam, OJ, etc. But best of all--a toaster so we could make our own toast. Toast in southeast Asia has rarely been crunchy enough for me. (It's usually stale bread warmed over). Ordinarily we're quite happy if we can just find fried eggs. But fried eggs and toast just the way we like it? It was great.



After breakfast we checked out of the hotel. We wanted to leave because the hot water didn't work, which you actually miss if your room is air-conditioned. Besides, we were paying for hot water. We asked them to fix it and they sent up a few guys with screwdrivers. They unscrewed stuff and scratched their heads and sent for more help. We would have changed rooms but the hotel was full.

We moved across the street to the Lao-Paris. We stayed for eight days and nights--long enough to rearrange the furniture once (because the air conditioner kept dripping, the staff finally had to move our bed). We spent most of that time writing to earn money.



Email costs 50 cents a minute in Vientiane (they have to call long distance to Bangkok) so we only used it for business. It was hard to see email from friends and not respond, but we couldn't afford to. (NOTE: A few months after we left Laos, we heard that Vientiane got a local server, so email rates should be much cheaper now).

We walked around town a lot. The buildings are a mix of quaint, if a bit run-down, French colonial houses with (peeling paint and long wooden shutters) typical Asian shop houses (Asian version of a strip mall), large concrete 1960s architectural atrocities (often abandoned), fancy hotels, temples, vacant lots, and the occasional oddball building. One oddball had the word "ATOMIC" written in big letters across the top.



The main streets are paved in the middle but filled with dirt from the curb for several feet out into the road. Crossing the main streets can take awhile. They are mostly one-way and the cars go in single-file. To cross we sort of worked our way to the middle until the traffic decided to avoid us





by going behind us instead of in front of us.

Many side streets are just dirt. It's strange to see nice restaurants on dirt streets. I think Washington DC looked like this during the Civil War.

The sidewalks didn't get much respect. Lots of gaping holes opened down to the sewer. Some homes put fences across the sidewalk to extend the front porch. Parking for cars and motorcycles is the most common use. We spent a lot of time walking along the edge of the street trying to stay out of the dirt and mud while also trying not to get hit. Vientiane was laid back enough that even when we had to walk down the middle of the street and no one would even honk at us to get out of the road.

The city sits right next to the Mekong but so far hasn't done anything with the waterfront. Some construction was underway. Across the river, Si Chiangmai, Thailand has an attractive waterfront park (though barely used and not well maintained).



The most annoying thing about Vientiane was the beggars. The tuk-tuk drivers left us alone usually (unlike in Thailand) and the street sellers didn't pester us (as they did in Indonesia) but occasionally a beggar, usually a kid, would glom on to us for several minutes hoping for a handout. If we didn't give them anything, and we quickly learned not to, they would follow us, grabbing our clothes or backpack. So all the other tourists and locals can see that you're too cheap to give them even a few pennies. But we figured if we gave them money we rewarded their behavior. We occasionally gave money to passive beggars sitting in front of shops to assuage our guilt.



One night we went to a restaurant around a pretty fountain in a traffic circle. It was a pleasant place to sit and eat Indian food and drink Beer Lao--until the parade of beggars started. A surprisingly plump woman holding a baby walked up to every table and stood silently. If she got some money, she left. Otherwise, she hung out for a long time. If she detected any sign that you felt guilt she would stay longer. She broke the guy at the next table that way. After her, a few kids did the same thing.

They'd stop at our table, rest their hands on it, and just stare at us while we ate. Joan gave maybe 100 kip (Laos currency, 3,420 kip = US\$1) to one of the beggars.

Then Joan overheard an obnoxious expat at the next table tell her friends that she always tells people who come to Laos NOT TO GIVE KIPS! It ruins the whole country." (Joan: at first I was really mad at her because it was obvious she made her comment mainly for my benefit, but later I realized she is right).

We often rationalize that giving money to beggars creates a market for beggars and therefore we should keep our pennies in our own pockets. But if it ruins the country to give three cents to a beggar, what happens when foreign banks and countries give Laos 60% of its national budget? (Joan: ironically, my critic at the next table probably worked for some charity).

Despite all that we really liked Vientiane's atmosphere. The food was always good, the shopkeepers always friendly. Other than expensive email it was a perfect place to spend a week writing and resting. It was harder to leave than any other city in the Eastern hemisphere, except for Singapore.



The only tourism we did was to visit Vientiane's version of the Arc de Triomphe and its most famous temple That Luang.



One day we went to the American Embassy to ask whether it would be safe to ride on a certain Laos highway because we had heard it had trouble with bandits. Although 20 or so Lao people were waiting in the embassy, apparently for visas, we got an interview right away. We had to stand in a phone booth-sized room separated from the embassy official, one Gregory Lawless, by thick glass. Behind him I saw tons of computers, nice desk chairs, low cubicle partitions, laser printers, etc. It was sort of a shock to see such a modern, clean American-style office in Laos.

Mr. Lawless told us in a professional, detached manner that "we do not recommend tourists travel that road." The last "incident," he admitted, had been a whole year earlier. He didn't describe it. (We later heard that in the "incident", some bandits had ambushed a wealthy expat French businessman, murdered him and six or seven Laos companions, and stolen \$40,000? in cash. Local people believed the bandits knew the Frenchman would be carrying a large amount of cash that day, and that they had specifically targeted him as opposed to randomly stopping cars on the highway). Mr. Lawless suggested we take a boat up the Mekong instead.

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Laos Chapter 3 - Leaving Vientiane

July 23 by Eric

What round-the-world trip is complete without at least once ignoring the advice of your embassy? We did consider Mr. Lawless's advice seriously. But we decided that based on what we had read and heard from others, conditions had changed enough to make the ride up route 13 safe for us. Hell, we had played chicken with Javanese bus drivers. Could Route 13 be that much more dangerous?

The danger was bandits, who had haunted a 170-km? stretch of the road between a small town called Kasi, and the ancient capital, Luang Prabang. The bandits are/were reputedly Hmong, who had sided with the Americans during the Vietnam War.

We considered the boat but we read that women and men were separated onboard, and women weren't allowed to ride on the top decks or on front. That would be OK for a few hours, but the ride was four or five days. Besides, we wanted to ride our bikes.

Despite having had eight days in Vientiane, we still had five things to take care of on the morning of our departure: pick up our laundry, go to the bank, pick up photos, swap books and check email. I hate having even one thing to do in the morning before we ride.

The bikes were packed, we finished four of the five items, and all we had left to do to was check email. We went to the Asian Pavilion Hotel, where we had stayed the first night, to use their business center. The manager, a Thai man named Pramook, loved us. He thought it was wonderful that we were riding bicycles across Laos. He had never heard of anyone doing that before. We liked him a lot too. He had been very kind. He had let us spend an hour on the computer offline for just US\$3, before charging us the online rate to send everything in 15 or 20 minutes at the normal 50 cents a minute rate.



Pramook had told us during our previous email excursions that he wanted to take a picture of us with our bikes before we left. We obliged him that morning. A photographer was coming (anyway?) to take a shot of him for the local newspaper. By the time that was done it was noon. Then Pramook invited us to be his special guest at the hotel's buffet lunch. We were running way late, but we had to eat anyway, so we agreed. Plus Pramook was good company.

We enjoyed a huge buffet of Lao food and Pramook told us the Lao name for everything and wrote it in Lao for us. This turned out to be really helpful later in small towns. He kept having waitresses bring more and more food. He even had

them prepare two versions of spicy papaya salad, Thai and Lao. The Thai version is sweeter and less spicy, the Lao version is fire. Neither one tastes anything like Papaya. I just kept eating and eating.

It turns out Pramook's son lives in San Francisco (where we did before this trip began) and has a restaurant called Thai corner. We plan to find it when we return.

Before we left he introduced us to his "president" (boss) and got a picture of us with the "president" too. Pramook told us he would put the picture in the lobby. If anyone sees it, let us know.



We ended up leaving around 1:30 pm, one of our latest departures ever. Fortunately, the road was entirely flat. After about 10km the shophouses and the colonial buildings thinned out and the rice padis dominated. Though Laos is a poor country it was good to see these farmers had some machinery, mainly the "mechanical water buffalos" (my term: a long-handled tractor with an engine way out front; farmers steer them through the

mud) we saw all over Thailand.

We enjoyed the scenery much more than we had on the ride to Vientiane: long views of rice padis dotted with small huts, lines of trees between fields, and small villages.

The kids showed special enthusiasm for waving and yelling. We started hearing more shouts of "Bonjour!" One kid yelled "Ou Allez-Vous?" Instead of the typical "Where you Go?" But as we got further and further north both Bonjour and Hello were replaced with the local hello, Sah-ba-dee.

We stopped at a food stall for a drink where six or eight women sat joking around. An older man rode up on his bike. He had about 20 small sculptures in a box on the back of his bike, and a few more in his front basket. He handed one around. They were about eight inches tall and looked like spindly cactus trunks with shells on each branch. He had painted the trunks orange and red and they vaguely matched the brown and white pattern of the shells. Strange to be selling door-to-door on a bike. We later met several other bike salesmen in Laos.

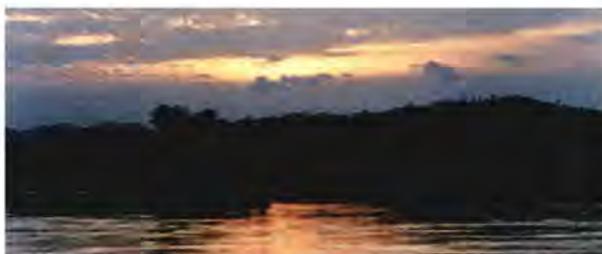


We reached our destination, Phanhong, shortly before dark. Unfortunately the town didn't have a hotel. It had a sign saying "Restaurant and Hotel" but that was for a hotel 100 miles away, we later learned. A woman pointed us down a side road. We pointed down the same road and asked Hotel? She first shook her head then nodded and said, Hotel Nam Song and pointed again. We tried to ask how far but couldn't.

Even though it meant we'd have to backtrack the next morning, we decided to take the side road because our guidebook mentioned places to stay that way, but nothing for another 80km the other way.

The first eight km or so were gorgeous. One of the rewards of riding in the dark is pretty twilight. (But you have to keep your mouth shut, because the bugs get thick and go down your throat). People were out walking on the road and almost all carried machetes. The kids looked like they were getting ready for a snipe hunt, carrying flashlights strapped to their heads, and baskets with nets over the top. An expat later guessed, based on our description, that these kids were fishing for fish or frogs in rice padis.

It was completely dark after about 10km. Over and over we asked for directions. The road turned to dirt and a light rain began to fall. We crossed a long narrow bridge over the Nam Lik river. A short way after we came to the gate house at a large hotel. Inside the gatehouse I saw a barber chair. The guard (and barber?) told us the hotel was full.



The guard directed us to another hotel in the small village (Ban Nampat?) back over the bridge. We wandered through the dark on the mud, dirt and rock roads asking all the way. I was getting discouraged as we approached a dead end. But then we saw a woman walking across a parking area. She worked for the hotel, which was hidden around a corner. She spoke perfect English. What a relief. She set us up with a great little room for 8,000 kip (US\$2.30)

Some youngish Lao people were having a good time at the hotel restaurant, drunkenly singing along with the radio. The more I hear Thai and Lao pop music, the less I like it. Hearing these people singing loudly was hilarious but also grating. We laughed and smiled with them, and raised our glasses to them. When their party started breaking up, a young woman approached us and violently pulled out a chair next to Joan. We were surprised but welcomed her. Then she looked at Joan, stopped suddenly, said "Sorry!" and scurried off with her friends, laughing. (Joan: Am I that ugly? I think she had only seen me from the back, and thought I was a man. Which means I must be a cuter man than Eric, since she pulled out the chair next to me and not him).

In the morning we realized the hotel had an amusement park: a train for kids to ride, bumper cars, and a place for a band to play, with huge speakers. I'm glad no band played that night.

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Laos Chapter 4 - Cows on Fishing Poles and The Storm that Stalked Us

July 24 By Eric



In the morning, during the 15 kilometer ride back to the main north-south road through Laos, Route 13, we saw several cows on fishing poles. At least that's what I called them. The cows are really just staked out to graze on the grass along the road but instead of being tied to a stake, the way my Alaska Uncle Bob staked out his horses, these cows were tied to a

contraption that looked like a bamboo fishing pole. The pole was attached to the top of a larger bamboo pole stuck in the ground. The pole could swivel and also bend up and down like a toll gate opening and closing. I'm not sure of the purpose of this but it kept the cow's rope off the ground and gave them a large grazing area.

As we went north we saw less of this and more cows just wandering around, often on the road. As we went north we also saw more barbed wire. At first I wondered why we saw more free grazing cows *and* more barbed wire until I figured out they used the barbed wire to keep the livestock out of the planted fields, not in the pasture.



There's far more livestock on the Lao roads than any other roads in Southeast Asia. P.J. O'Rourke, writing about El Salvador, said the surest sign that the Communists had screwed up the country was the lack of chickens running around. By P.J.'s measure, Laos is doing quite well despite the Communists. Chickens, turkeys, goats, pigs, cows and water buffalo run all over Laos in huge families. Many times a giant sow would run across the road in front of us, followed by six or so piglets, then a moment later by two spacey runts.



For lunch we stopped in Ban Hinhup, a tiny town along the Nam Lik river. We ordered "Tom Mak Hoong" with "Khao Nuaw" or spicy papaya salad with sticky rice. A couple of guys sitting at the foodstall got interested in my horn so I played several songs for them. They kept talking to us as we tried to eat the super-spicy dish. We found out they were both 32 years old, just like us. One was a teacher and we think one was trying to say he was a Christian. Other than that we couldn't communicate too many verbal ideas. Everyone tried to play the horn and that got a lot of laughs. I gave quick lessons so some people could at least make a tone.

They could see we were suffering on the spices. We downed lots of water and they kept getting the waitress to bring pitchers of ice water. Fortunately in Laos, as in Thailand, the water served has been boiled so it's safe to drink. The most careful travelers still won't drink it, but we do. And we haven't regretted it.

After we crossed the Nam Lik the road started climbing. As the hills increased the population decreased. We no longer saw rice fields but mostly young jungle. Some hills had been victims of slash and burn where the jungle is burned, and the following year, rice is planted. The rice uses the ashes for nutrients. After one or two harvests the nutrients are spent and the land is abandoned.

At one little village we saw four guys and a woman (coordinating) trying to bring down a TV antenna on a tall bamboo pole. They were having some trouble and just about lost control of it but they were laughing the whole time. We saw this over and over again in Laos--people laughing and smiling while they worked.

As we crested a small hill we discovered an especially picturesque view of some mountains in the distance. I pulled over to take a photo but before I could snap, a big truck crested the hill from the other side. A pickup truck was passing the truck. I waited for them to pass but they stopped, which traffic rarely does.



Both drivers leaped out and ran towards the back of the big truck. Tied to the truck's hook-like trailer hitch was a huge dead snake. Its head hung straight down, tongue out. It was dripping blood. Its head had been dragging on the road for a bit. The big truck driver got there first, and pulled the head off the ground. (Joan: I guess to make his 'goods' look better). Then the pickup truck driver bought the snake for about 3,000 kip (less than US\$1).



As we rode up and down relatively small foothills, we passed a tall mountain to the east. Mist shrouded the top and when we got a long view we could see it was raining hard at isolated places up and down the valley.

We stopped for a photo again and I thought I heard a waterfall nearby in the thick vine covered growth behind us. But the roar of the waterfall got louder even as we started moving away from it. I looked back and saw a rain squall chasing us down the road! Not only were the rain drops large enough to see (at first I feared they were hail) but I could see a wet/dry line in the road and the line was moving toward us. The squall stalked us down the road. It vaguely frightened us that the normally indifferent Mother Nature was deliberately acting malevolent towards us. Instinctively we pedaled harder even though we both knew it was futile. The



storm quickly engulfed and soaked us. A storm with an attitude.



About 25km from Vang Vieng and a few km from any village we parked our bikes against a small bridge railing for a rest and a snack. We had saved some Oreos for just such an occasion. Down the river



valley we could see large karst cliffs. About the time we finally got through the thick export-quality plastic wrap on the cookies, a man on a bike with a large stainless steel box on the back rode by. A bell hung from his handlebars. He rung it with a small metal bar he held

in his hand. Almost no one keeps two hands on the handlebars in Laos.

Knowing he was selling something possibly edible, I waved him down. He took a round lid off the box, which was double-lined. The inner box contained carefully cut rectangles of vanilla ice cream, still quite frozen. We bought two for 200 kip (about U.S. 6 cents) each. He served it on six-inch wooden skewers. Was God making up for siccing the storm on us by sending us an ice cream man?

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Laos Chapter 5 - Karst and Caverns

July 24-25 By Eric

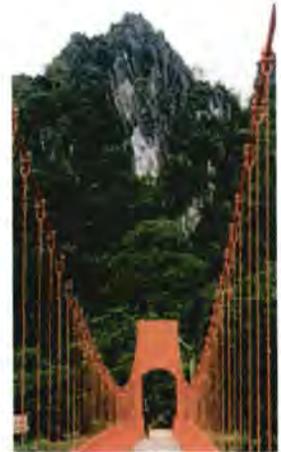


We had heard Vang Vieng was "pretty," but spectacular, amazing, or incredible is more like it.

The map shows that Route 13 makes an unusual U-turn just south of Vang Vieng to get around a mountain. On the north side of the mountain lies a long, flat east-west valley. A limestone wall abruptly terminates the valley's west end. Within the valley an occasional limestone monolith juts up like a thumb from under the earth.

We entered the valley in late afternoon. Small but thick gray squalls smudged the view here and there ahead of us. Lightning flashed in the distance, the temperature dropped and cool gusts whipped. The valley felt full of energy. We must have drawn on that energy, because we rode very quickly for the last 10km of that day, somehow not running into any squalls.

We stayed in a bungalow along the Nam Song river near the base of some of the most spectacular cliffs. The cliffs are typical "karst topography" which I had never seen except in books. The silhouette is very irregular and jagged. It's not sawtooth because the dips are sometimes very deep and the rises sometimes very tall. If you look closely at the top of a single mountain you can see a miniature (fractal) version of the range's jagged irregularity.



In the morning we walked across a pedestrian suspension bridge over the river. I think it's the only toll pedestrian bridge I've ever seen. (It's new--until a few years ago the only way to cross was find a boat). We read about caves in the cliffs but didn't have high expectations.

Sometimes caves are awesome but mostly they're just muddy horizontal holes in the ground.

This one was fantastic. It had large chambers, giant slippery-looking stalagmites everywhere and constant dripping water. Someone had put walking paths and bridges in and had done a good job with colored lighting. It was far better than it would have been if we had seen it with just a flashlight. You see the strange colors (mostly reddish orange and brown). Much of it looked like the color of cows. One strange oozing rock actually looked like a cow, one painted by Salvador Dali.

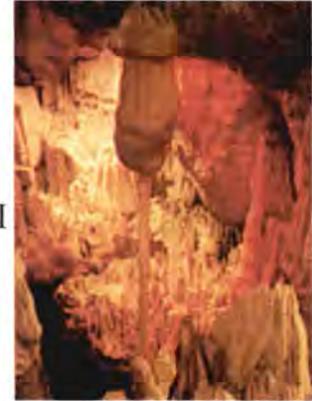




We left around 11 a.m.. The road followed the Nam Song valley for a spectacular 25km further upstream. The cliffs continued on our left, getting even more spectacular.

As always, people yelled "Where you go?" or "Ou allez-vous?" When we answered 'Kasi' that afternoon, many people said, "oh no no. You must not. Too steep." At least that's what I

think they said. Most people here bike around with a passenger on the rear rack, and they only have single-speed bikes, so naturally the hills are too much for them.



The ride was constantly beautiful. We stopped every kilometer or less for another photo, few of which captured much. At one pleasantly terraced rice field a dozen or so people leaned over as they stood ankle-deep in the mud, gathering rice into lots of foot-tall "haystacks" We put on the zoom lens and took a few shots. I felt a little bad about that. Especially with the zoom lens I felt like we were treating them like zoo animals. Since Borneo we've tried to be especially careful about that. To make up for it, I played Scotland the Brave for them. They loved it and cheered and laughed when I was done.



After we crossed the Nam Song at Ban Phatang, it started to get steep, but the grade peaked at 10% and the road had signs to prove it. It was hard work but

fortunately an overcast sky kept it relatively cool.

We stopped to rest about halfway up the main pass. A motorcycle with a stainless steel box on the back drove up. The driver squawked his clown-fire-engine-style horn. He wore a black fedora with a black string around his neck to hold it on. I thought maybe it was another ice cream man, so I flagged him down.



It was the bread man. He had a box full of baguettes. The French influence in Laos wonderfully lives on in the ready availability of good bread. He sliced the baguette as if for a sandwich, and poured on sweetened condensed milk before we could stop him. It cost 500 kip (15 cents). It was good.



At the top of the pass we saw a village of 50 or so identical, evenly spaced, new-looking thatched houses. (I later heard the Laos government is in the process of moving the tribes that live high on the mountains down to

lower elevations, and they are doing this by building these villages. Unfortunately I know

nothing of Lao politics.) When we were still 200 meters away, the village children sprinted down the path from the village to the road to greet us.

All day we worried, just a little bit, about the bandits that had caused trouble on this road around Kasi, our destination. We passed a checkpoint, with a uniformed government official. We stopped and everyone laughed. I think we could have kept going. The official came out and asked where we were going and coming from. Everyone asks us that and he wasn't particularly formal about it. He looked at his watch. It was 3 p.m. and he told us we'd make it to Kasi in two hours.



A bit later, we saw two motorcycles stopped ahead of us. As we approached, it looked like they were preparing to start, as if to intercept us. Could these be our bandits? But as we neared I could see they were putting baguettes in their bags. The bread man had apparently just passed.



Sure enough, a few hundred meters later we heard the honking and saw the man with the fedora rolling slowly through a village. He waved as we passed. A few kilometers out of town he passed and waved again. He seemed like the happiest guy in the world.

I thought that would be the last we saw of him but just about 12km from Kasi we saw him again, this time pushing his motorcycle. He smiled and waved and this time pointed to his engine and shrugged his shoulders.

The road flattened out and the rest of the way to Kasi was a breeze. We stayed at the only guest house, a rather blah but clean enough place. We had to carry all of our stuff up a flight of slippery stairs, always a pain.

Just after dinner a couple from the Netherlands checked in --on bikes! They were the first bike tourists we've seen in Laos, and the first since Team Discipline (aka Team Swiss) in southern Thailand two months before. We were very excited to talk to them.

As we stood in front of the guesthouse admiring their bikes, someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was the bread man. He had pushed his motorcycle the last 12km into town, and he was just arriving, well over an hour after us. He was still smiling.

The bread man with his broken down motorcycle is happy; the rice harvesters leaning over in the mud are happy; the postal workers are happy; the relocated kids at the top of the pass are happy. Can anything get these people down?

Next: [Dutch Cyclists and the Bandit Road](#)

 Laos Main Page  World Trip

Laos Chapter 6 - Dutch Cyclists and the Bandit Road

July 26 By Eric

The small town of Kasi lies in the middle of an awe-inspiring mountain road and near the last holdout of insurgents turned bandits. But the town ain't much.

Kasi is a truck stop, a strip about 300 meters long with dark wood buildings along the road. A couple of the wealthier residents have built neat new concrete homes in the same Chinese style we keep seeing all over the world (square concrete buildings painted white with red tile roofs, wood trim), contrasting sharply with the old, shabby wood buildings in the rest of town.



We stayed at the only guesthouse in town. I was excited to see in the register that Team Swiss had stayed there on June 30. This was July 25 and only two other people had signed the register since then, one from Japan and another I couldn't read. Few tourists stay in Kasi (Lao and maybe Thai people don't have to register) since it's only an hour by car from there to Vang Vieng.

With this in mind, I was surprised that the restaurant had menus in English and the staff was rather unsurprised and uninterested by us. Later we solved the riddle.



The fact that few tourists stay in Kasi made it even more remarkable that we ran into the cycling Dutch. We sat with them over Beerlao while we discussed our trips.

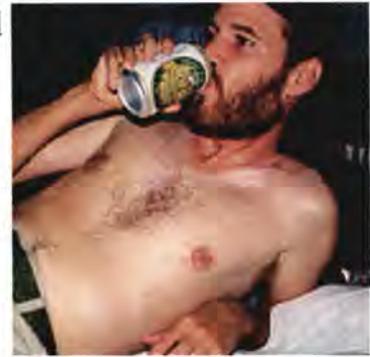
Cok and Ellie, from near Utrecht, Holland, were on a six-week tour. We liked them right off. They had flown into Chiang Mai, in northwestern Thailand had had ridden their bikes to the Mekong river, which they crossed to enter Laos. But they hadn't done much riding in Laos yet.

From the border they caught a speedboat down the Mekong to Luang Prabang, where they stayed several days before catching a bus to Kasi.

Cok was a gregarious man with thick gray hair. He was in his mid-40s, enthusiastic about everything, laughed at the least comedy, and was lots of fun to be around. Ellie, who was about the same age, looked quite Dutch somehow. She had reddish hair. Both were teachers. They frequently take off six weeks at a time to bicycle in different parts of the world. Once they took off five months to bike on Sulawesi in Indonesia.

Every now and then Cok would be going on about something

when Ellie would say something to him in Dutch. Then he would reduce his exaggerations or say something like, "Well anyway ..." They made an excellent team this way.



The main topic was the bandit road between Kasi and Luang Prabang. When the evening started we planned to ride it, despite the U.S. embassy's caution. By the time the evening ended, we had changed our minds.

Cok and Ellie had heard a story of a man and his son murdered on the road about a year ago. They also said that locals in Luang Prabang had pleaded with them not to ride the road alone. I was moved by the story about the man and his son, while Joan was more moved by the warnings of the locals. The guy that ran the guesthouse said a buts to Luang Prabang stopped out front at 10 a.m. the next morning. We decided to take it.



Ellie was careful to prevent Cok from urging us to take the bus. I liked that they simply told us what they had heard.

Actually Cok and Ellie's bus ride sounded somewhat bad. A few hours out of Luang Prabang it broke down. The driver said he could fix it in 20 minutes. Seven hours later they were still stuck.

But it sounded like the tourists on the bus made the most of it. People from a nearby village came out and brought them food, and the tourists had a great time making friends with them. But after seven hours Cok and Ellie finally decided to seek their own transport. Cok said he felt bad about leaving the gang. He and Ellie walked with the bikes a few hundred meters down the road and quickly got a ride. I don't know how they did this, considering how light the traffic is on that road, and considering how small most of the cars are.



Then we learned why the restaurant has menus in English. Cok and Ellie's bus finally arrived and all the tourists piled out for dinner, talking like old friends. They were thrilled to see Cok and Ellie again. One Aussie had a huge white beard that made him look like Santa. Apparently a replacement bus arrived an hour after Cok and Ellie got their ride.

They made me wish I had been on the broken down bus with them.

The next morning we had all our stuff ready by 9:15 a.m. in case the bus arrived early, as things often do in Asia.



While we waited out front, a tuk-tuk delivered a middle-aged



European man with gray hair. He got out and sat near us. We learned he lived in Luang Prabang and was waiting for the same bus. He spoke Lao and was very familiar with the area.

He scoffed at our fear of the bandit road. He had a very different version from what the U.S. Embassy referred to as an "incident" on the road a year earlier. The murdered man, he told us, was a French expat businessman, suspiciously traveling with \$40,000 cash. And not only was he killed, but five (or six, I can never remember). Lao companions were also killed. He was convinced the bandits had not acted randomly.

When we told him the embassy suggested we travel to Luang Prabang by boat on the Mekong, he said, "Now that's really dangerous. Those boats roll over and sink in the mud and you disappear without a trace. I've seen it happen!" Later he recommended several boat trips we should take. His name was Oliver and we got to know him a bit. This was a typical Oliverism.

Around 10 a.m. a fairly full jumbo pulled up. Fortunately Oliver could speak to the bus man and found out this bus was also heading to Luang Prabang.

The bus driver expertly put our bikes in rails that ran along the side of the roof and tied them in with rope. They weren't laying on anything and nothing was laying on them. It was the easiest bus ride the bikes have ever had.

Inside the back of the pickup were two benches facing each other. Eleven or 12 people, about half tourists, half Lao, sat inside. Two or three more stood on the wide back "bumper" (designed to be stood on) and Oliver and I rode on the roof.

I loved riding on the roof. I could see everything. The only trouble was the swaying made me slightly seasick and as we leaned into the turns I kept thinking, "Isn't this pickup a little top-heavy?" The road from Kasi to Luang Prabang goes over four or five mountain ranges and is constantly going up or down and around hairpin curves.

Oliver said the bus would stop shortly before the town of Phu Khun and we would have to sit inside so the police didn't hassle us or the drivers. Apparently it's illegal to ride on top. We didn't stop though. We still sat on top as we rolled into the foggy, cool town, about 1100 meters above sea level. Oliver saw the police and told me not to make eye contact. A few people got on and off and thankfully they unloaded the big sack of coconuts I had leaned on.



Unfortunately they didn't get rid of the container of fermented fish until later. Every once in awhile I caught a whiff and it stank.

It turns out we had nothing to worry about. The policeman working that day didn't care if people rode on top and the bus man knew he would be working. We did stop just outside of Luang Prabang for the police, so I spent the last few kilometers of the ride standing on the back bumper. In the rain.

It would have been one hell of a bike ride. When we passed through little towns or when we had great long views I regretted not riding the bike. Sometimes I have wondered if it wouldn't be better to travel with a small backpack and get around on bus and not have all the hassle and physical stress of biking. But when I actually ride the bus, I'm really glad we have the bikes.

Oliver was great company on the roof. He pointed out the Hmong villagers in their traditional clothing, the young teak trees planted all over the place and the scrubby hillsides that are all that remains after slash-and-burn agriculture. He sounded like he felt SOOO strongly about everything. I believe he really did.

He told us about the places we "MUST go" and that we "really MISSED" Indonesia since we didn't see this or that and "you can't really UNDERSTAND Laos unless you..." Normally this would bother me. I'm already a little insecure about my travel savvy so I'm touchy about the subject. But from Oliver I didn't mind. His energy was so high I knew I could never travel like him. Inevitably there would be places he went to and we missed.

He seemed to have traveled just about everywhere on the planet. I thought he must be making this up but every place we talked about I could tell really had been there because of the details he knew. In San Francisco he said he was especially fond of the "fusion" cuisine (called Pacific-Rim in most restaurants now).

Oliver had a theory that most of the prettiest cities in the world are at places where the mountains and sea meet - San Francisco, Capetown, etc.

Next: [A day on the Mekong](#)

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Laos Chapter 7- Misbehaving Monk

July 27-28 By Eric



Luang Prabang is a U.N. world heritage site. I'm not sure what that means, but apparently the Taj Mahal and Angkor Wat are also members of this club. The things that make Luang Prabang special are a little more subtle than these other places.

It sits at the confluence of the Mekong and the Nam Khan. The rivers run parallel for a little while before meeting. As Oliver said, this gives Luang Prabang the general shape of Manhattan. Actually in his usual exuberance, Oliver said Luang Prabang was precisely the same shape as Manhattan.

Unlike Manhattan, Luang Prabang has a big hill in the middle with 382 steps (we counted twice) to the top. Buddhists like to make sacred spots of the same places that I would make sacred spots. The top of a hill with its view of both rivers is such a spot. Many years ago they built a stupa up there. More recently someone put a big

gun up there too, though only the base of the gun remains. Lower down, the hill is littered with wats (temples) both old and new.



The town surrounds the hill and contains an amazing number of wats. You can't throw a dead cat without it falling in some sacred place, probably hitting a monk in a saffron orange robe along the way. Each wat contains several glittering gold and red buildings with everything ornate, from the points of the roofs to the door, to the tall columns inside.

Plus they've got tall Buddhas, short Buddhas, standing Buddhas, reclining Buddhas, Buddhas on wheels, Buddhas on boats. Many wats had beautiful long narrow 20 man boats used in the big annual race.

Other than the wats, the French colonial buildings all over the streets are also endearing. Most of these are two story white buildings with shutters painted in bright colors on the second floor and big shuttered doorways on the first floor. The stories are usually separated by awning or balcony. In general the buildings are unusually well painted and maintained for Laos.



In Luang Prabang the traffic's not so thick and the air not so dusty as in Vientiane. The drivers are quite tame as well. I guess they're just so used to dodging cows, pigs, potholes, broken down buses, etc. They have plenty of patience for us on bicycles.



We explored several wats but one in particular impressed us most. For this one we had to pay 1000 kip each to enter. The most impressive building was the smallest too at about the size of a maid's cottage. It was painted pink. Amazing mosaics depicted people riding elephants, praying, and general daily life scenes.

The mosaics were made out of small pieces of colored mirror glass inlaid in the walls. Each piece was no bigger than an square inch and irregular shaped, as if the mirror glass had just been smashed on the floor and the mosaics made out of the pieces.



Inside the buildings had many paintings. Inside one important building with a large Buddha shrine, the strong smell of incense, and jet black walls onto which scenes were painted in gold. Some of these scenes were rather dark and violent - people getting hit with axes, sawed in half, boiled alive.



We wandered into an especially tall building that contained the royal cremation barge. It was a towering thing, 30 feet high, gilded gold and red. It looked generally like a stupa with a very sharp point on top. I noticed the whole thing sat on wheels but part of the building would have to be disassembled to get it out the door.

The room was unlit and as we walked in the dark area behind the barge, a very young monk jumped out. He was no more the eight years old and wearing the usual orange saffron robes. He stood beside a wooden box labeled donations (every building in the wat had such a box). Our little monk demanded "1,000!" and pointed at the box.

I said "already" and showed him our receipt but he was adamant. "1000!" he kept saying, probably the only English he knew. Even in his monk's robes this kid came off as a real brat. I put 1,000 kip (30 cents) in the donation box though he wanted to take it directly. Joan refused and he kept hassling her so we left.

But Joan was angry. This little brat monk was trying to manipulate and rip off tourist just because he was dressed like a monk and we would have certain respect for him. Joan went back inside. He was hiding in the darkness behind a pillar and Joan caught his shadow. He thought she couldn't see him and was rounding the pillar opposite her to stay out of her

view.

But Joan knew where he hid. She leaped suddenly backward around the pillar right in front of him and made a big toothy smile and held her hands out in front of her like claws. She scared the hell out of him. He let out a scream, jumped back wide eyed then laughed and smiled.

I heard the commotion and went inside. By the time I got there the monk had regained his composure and tried once again to get something from the tourists. He started shivering and making "ooooohh ohhhhh oooo" sounds as if the fright had sent him into convulsions or something. His acting was pretty awful though. He's got to learn to be more subtle. We walked off and he shut up, lurking in the dark until the next tourists come I guess.



We ran across Oliver's gallery in Baan Khily. His dream, I gathered from our talk on the roof of the bus, was a gallery/shop/exhibition space where local and international artists gathered and did their thing. He didn't just want to sell paintings, he wanted painters in resident. He was anxious for me to play my French Horn there. (I did but I'm sure I disappointed him. I couldn't remember any Mozart).

Oliver has no shortage of ideas and in his gallery/shop he carries them out or has others carry them out. They made their own paper. The paper was so good he took it to Vientiane and the national printing office printed large detailed etchings on it using some ancient press.

While I played my horn, an extremely talented young Lao man was working on a powerful painting of a woman in ornate tribal clothing. He was copying the painting from a photograph. The painting was almost indistinguishable from a the photo, except larger.



The balcony on Oliver's gallery's second floor is the best place in Luang Prabang to have a beer.

Oliver also introduced us to an unbelievable restaurant. They had five spice duck, chicken in heaven, and a water cress salad to die for. All three of us ate, with several BeerLao, for \$10.

I'm sure this restaurant will be featured in the next Lonely Planet guide book and it's too bad for Oliver. Prices could only go up and quality could only go down. We ate there several times and discovered that the food was best while Oliver narrated and told us the painstaking details of making each dish.

While Oliver is clearly in love with Laos an it's people (he moved there after all) he is not

completely uncritical. In a bit of frustration on a slow moving bus, he scolded the driver, "We [the rest of the world] build the roads and the buses and the Lao contribution is stopping! That's you contribution to driving - STOPPING!"

One night at the restaurant there was lots of confusion over the bill. Oliver re-added the whole thing and told them exactly what it should cost and how much change he should get. We have confusions of this sort at restaurants often and we always thought it was because we couldn't speak Lao. Oliver speaks Lao and eats at that same place almost every night, and still has trouble!

Next: [Mekong River and a girl named bilge pump](#)

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Laos Chapter 8 - Mekong River and a girl name Bilge Pump

July 29 By Eric

The best thing we did in Luang Prabang was the boat trip on the Mekong. For ten dollars our hotel manager offered us a trip to Pak Ou, a very special cave along the river, in his uncle's boat. The "brochure" (3x5 piece of paper) said we would stop at a couple villages along the way to see where they make Lao-Lao whiskey and weave the wonderful sarongs that all the women wear.

A tuk-tuk was waiting for us on the morning and took us out of town to "uncle's" place on the Nam Khan. The tuk-tuk driver was our hotel man's brother and we had to pay him for the ride. Uncle waited for us under a new highway bridge where six little boys were half heartedly fishing with homemade bamboo poles.



Uncle's boat was much longer than we expected, very long and narrow. It had a roof and seats, though the seats were no bigger than Sunday school chairs. We had expected a long tail boat but this had an inboard engine and steered with a big truck steering wheel. The pilot sits in front. In narrow or shallow spots he got a long bamboo pole off the roof and poled us along.



A little girl, about 7-years-old, wearing a nice sarong and blouse sat in the back. Before we left, uncle spent a few minutes in the engine room. Eventually he started the engine and walked back to the front of the boat. Then the little girl went into the engine room for a little while. When she came out we departed.

Later I discovered what she was doing in there: bailing. Throughout our trip, she would climb into the engine room every 15 or 20 minutes and bail. When we looked back we could see her little foot sticking out under the engine room door and her little hand emptying the bailer, made out of the bottom of an antifreeze container. She would sleep for awhile then get up and do her job again without being told. I named her Bilge Pump.



This was the rainy season and the river had a strong current. The Pak Ou caves were upstream so uncle stayed close to shore to catch the eddies. For several kilometers we passed continuous boats "parked" along the shore. Most of them were unpowered, canoe size

craft. The owners docked them to shore by sticking a long piece of bamboo deep into the bank leaning over the water at 45 degrees. They tied a rope to the bamboo pole and moored the boats to it. Some had such a mooring line for bow and stern.



The unpowered crafts were either paddle or poled along. Most of the boats we saw were just moored. Most people fish earlier or later in the day. We did see a family of three carrying a big bag of rice and some other groceries tediously working their way upstream, the man standing in the bow poling, the woman sitting the back paddling, and a child paddle dipping in the middle.

We also saw speed boats with fancy bright red and yellow paint jobs and giant noisy engines like you typically find in boats named "Erection" (See Murray River chapters). The owners of these boats are very particular about them and keep them very clean. One was in a floating garage.

The speed boats carried (and shook, rattled and rolled) people long distance at high speed and higher volume. Most of the passengers wore helmets. Watching them and hearing them made me never want to ride one. Besides, the Mekong, like the Mississippi contains a lot of debris, especially in the rainy season. We saw whole trees floating along - one so big it actually had a person riding on it.



We also saw large slow boats that take days to do what the speed boats do in a few hours.



These boats look like a canoe, 50 feet long, 10 feet wide, with a long skinny house on top. Old falling apart instances of these made for floating gas stations.

The river sits in a magnificent place, surrounded by hills and mountains. Oddly, it does not appear to be in a deep gorge. From atop Phu Si, it appears to just run around the mountains. In fact, looking at that rugged terrain it's hard to imagine how a river that size makes it through.

The main Pak Ou cave has just one large chamber. The spectacular thing about it is the location just above the Mekong. Inside we found no stalagmites, but thousands of Buddhas of every size had been placed there over centuries by Buddhists. The first European to draw a picture of this cave was a Frenchman named Francis Garnier. This was yet another awe inspiring place I too would make sacred.

We found another cave at the top of many flights of stairs. It too was filled with Buddhas of every size, though it was



deep and dark so we could see much.



On the way upriver we had stopped at a village where they made Lao-Lao whiskey. When we were there, however, no one seemed to be making any. We did see hundreds and hundreds of jars, each about 15 inches tall. It smelled like a distillery so I imagine these contained fermenting materials. We looked at the town's other

wears (I was ready to buy a shot of whiskey but the town just didn't seem in the party mood - it was still morning) and came back to find Uncle and Bilge Pump waiting for us, ready to go. They also waited patiently for us while we toured the caves.



On the way downstream, the brochure said we would stop a village specializing in weaving. But uncle insisted we pay 5,000 kip (\$1.50) for this stop. We argued that it came with the tour but he wouldn't budge. They had waited so patiently for us all day and it was so nice being chauffeured around that we had been ready to tip uncle and Bilge Pump at least 5,000 kip. However, we refused to pay on principal and also because the Lao-lao whiskey town was really just a shopping stop and probably so

was the weaving village.

Uncle dropped us at the confluence of the rivers, the tip of Luang Prabang and about 1 mile from the hotel and we were on our own to get back.

Next: [Rough night with rats.](#)



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Laos Chapter 9 - Late start, rough night

Aug. 1 by Eric

We're such procrastinators. Six nights we spent in Luang Prabang and once again, as in Vientiane, we still had errands to run in the morning before we left. I'm not a morning person. I want to sleep in *and* I want to get an early start. But if we waited until we had all our errands done then left the next morning, we would still be there.

A few more of those mornings and I'll have an ulcer. I remember one day in [Campbell River](#), British Columbia when we didn't leave until 2:30 pm. On mornings like this I can hear the clock ticking and feel the sun getting hotter and I have visions of us on winding roads at dusk pushing ourselves to make it before dark, only to arrive exhausted, hungry and irritable.



We finally left Luang Prabang around 11 a.m.

The population density was thinning fast as we went north and we expected to have to cook for ourselves one of these days. Since we arrived in Bali on Jan. 20, 1998, we had ridden 6,000 km across SE Asia and had always found someplace to serve us breakfast, lunch and dinner.

That time was coming to an end. So we stocked up on ramen noodles, jook (rice porridge) and cookies.

It was hot. I have made fun of people in tropical climates when they say "Man, it's hot today." I want to say, "It's hot as hell everyday, haven't you noticed?" Watch CNN any day and I guarantee you the forecast for Singapore is 31 to 33 degrees Celsius.

But now I can tell the difference between hot and hotter. That very pretty somewhat hilly day felt like an oven. The thermometer on my bike computer doesn't read correctly in direct sunlight (Cateye: what am I supposed to do, ride with a beach umbrella?) but it felt like 48C (118F). My water bottle was hot to the touch. When we stopped I squeezed the sweat out of my helmet pads and the stream made a little puddle of mud on the ground. If I didn't do this regularly the stinging sweat would run into my eyes. My hands sweat so much the handlebar tape squishes like wet tennis shoes. My fingers get pruned.



Around 20km out of town, still along the Mekong and level ground, we stopped for a drink at a picnic table under a tree in front of someone's house. They sold drinks, soap, hard candy, twine and simple little things their neighbors might need. Most of these places have coolers of crushed ice so they can serve drinks cold.



As we drank Joan noticed several new looking straw baskets hanging from a board on the house next door. Last year she lost her helmet visor and she's been experimenting with different things to replace it. So she tried the basket. She put on her helmet, fit the cone-shaped basket over it, and it fit perfectly. Everyone laughed at her. But it worked great. A man at the shop gave her some twine and made a big deal out of tying the basket onto her helmet (through the helmet's air holes). The basket has a sort of a commodore's hat shape. Joan said it looked like something Sir Francis Drake would wear. I said she looked like Capt. Crunch.



It cost about 15 cents. In New Zealand, we had seen a replacement visor alone, nothing more than a piece of plastic with some velcro, for US\$25!



After about 30km we crossed the Nam Ou then turned right and followed that river upstream. We had some good vistas of black and white limestone cliffs. We ate sticky rice and some pretty bad green soda with ice for lunch at a little village. All the kids around came to stare at us while we ate.

The villages had lots and lots of kids and they almost always go crazy when we ride through. The first one who sees us starts to yell and then everybody runs out to the road to wave and yell (Sabadee, Hello or bye Bye!) In some ways it's sort of a hero's welcome. But sometimes I don't want to be the center of attention.

We climbed a few big hills when a big rain storm came through. That was a real relief. It was heavy rain and drenched everything quickly. I've never seen so much steam rising from the road. It cooled us so much steam came off our raincoats.



The last 30km we went through a relatively flat valley and passed many small villages. It was a good thing it was flat because we were tired. The sun, hills, distance (115km) and the late start had really beat us up. We rode the last 60km or so almost without stopping.

We reached Pak Mong shortly before dark. Pak Mong is a truck stop.



It's kind of shabby and muddy.

We asked around for a guesthouse. People quickly showed us to a building at the corner and pointed to a door that led into the darkness of an old wood building with a corrugated roof. In front of the building were a few tables and outdoor kitchens where they mostly served soup from giant pots heated over a wood fire. Joan had room duty (we alternate who has to check out the hotel room each night; the other person watches the bikes). A friendly, well-dressed woman greeted Joan, as Joan said, "like an old friend" and then showed her the "sheet" room.

JOAN: She led me into this large, barn-like building, which was dark because the electricity was off. Behind a large sheet lay four thin futons, side by side, on a wood platform, separated only by mosquito nets. It looked awful but we had no choice. I asked them to turn on the light but they didn't understand. They turned it on later.



ERIC. It was good the light was off. I never saw how dirty our sheets were.

We got a better idea of what it's like to live in a Lao village than we would get in a hotel. First, it's noisy. Those wood plank floors makes lots of noise, especially when kids run around on them. Second, though we don't see much activity in the villages during the day, lots goes on in the evening. Everyone constantly walked around the house, talking and moving stuff around. Even after the generator was shut off, they got out candles and were still busy at I don't know what.

We piled all our stuff on one of the beds, slept in another and hoped no truck drivers arrived in the middle of the night to sleep in the other. We were lucky that the rain cooled things off and we weren't hot.

When I first lied down I thought I would just rest for a few minutes then find some food. But I was so tired I didn't get up again until morning. I slept fairly well but woke several times. Twice rats scurried across the floor just above our heads. Once something ran across the corrugated metal roof. Another time a couple dogs started fighting and a horse whined. The rats were creepy but I was too tired to worry about them. I knew this place would wake at sunrise so I didn't want to waste any silence worrying about rats.

It's too bad we arrived so tired. I would like to have met the family whose home this was. Not that we could have said much to each other but it could have been a better experience at least. But if we hadn't been so tired, we wouldn't have stayed there.

Next: [Mountains and Hmong Village](#)

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Laos Chapter 10 - Hmong Village

Aug. 2 By Eric

People started stirring at sunrise just as I expected. We wandered out and loaded the bikes in a little muddy spot near the door. Several people watched curiously. One guy helped, which was nice. It's so much better to interact with people than just exchange stares.

It was too early for us to be hungry so we just got coffee and rolls. This was a mistake especially since we hadn't had dinner the night before. Just before we left we met a young college student who spoke surprisingly good English. He was very nice and wished us luck. I had felt a little bad for not interacting more with Lao people, so it was good to talk to someone. It was also good to see that someone from this truck stop was going to college.



We had no idea what to expect from the road that day. As the crow flies, we had only 30km to go. But the map showed a very very windy road. All we knew was that the road wasn't mud. The Chinese had built it in exchange for logging rights. Oliver had said it was a terrible road.

The first kilometer marker we saw was marked 75. We presumed that this meant it was 75km to Maung Xai, our destination. This was way further than we expected but it turned out to be a little shorter than we actually had to ride.



Seventy-five km is normally a short day for us. But that day it was long because of The Hills. We climbed and climbed and climbed. All day was overcast. We passed few villages or even people. The road cut through a mostly young forest of deciduous trees--no palms or bananas up here. Directly along the edge of the road was a thick growth of weeds and vines. Now and then we got a distant view where we could see very tall mountains behind us to the east with clouds mingling in the jagged summits. We didn't so much look down valleys as down long, U-shaped ravines.

Sometimes we could see whole bare hills below us, randomly dotted with small bamboo and thatch sheds, and mountain goat trails connecting them.

We found one of these sheds along the road and lay down in it to rest. It's basically a six-

foot by five-foot elevated bamboo platform with a bamboo roof but no walls. It was one of the first times in recent memory that we stopped to rest on the road for more than a minute or two, without having anyone show up to watch. A couple of jumbos, motorcycles and one large truck passed. A white horse grazed nearby.

The road followed the hillside at a very even grade. It turned right, toward the mountain, over a steep flowing stream, and would then take a hairpin turn left back to a scenic view, then right again towards another creek. We thought over and over again that we had reached the top only to have our hopes dashed and see the road rounding another point far above us. According to my uncalibrated altimeter, we peaked at about 4,000 feet.

Once we reached 3,500 feet we started rising and falling but always rising a little more than falling.

I drank lots of water on the way up and we were running low although we had started just 15km earlier with over three liters. At the first village we passed we asked at a place that had soap and toothpaste if they had any bottled water. They didn't.

The next village, called Ban Song Cha, was well stocked. The different ethnic groups in Laos are defined by the altitude they live at, low, middle, or high. The high group are the Hmong, and we were definitely in Hmong territory. The people wore very distinctive clothing of dark and light blues, black, and sometimes red and hot pink. They don't wear sarongs; they wear baggy black pants that flare out and go only as low as the calf. Since they live in cool places they normally wear long-sleeved, somewhat thick jackets. The jacket often has a deep V neckline almost like a vest, and wide black "lapels." Most of the hats were made by wrapping thick, embroidered cloth around their heads. The hats were often fringed with small, yellow tassels hanging in back.



This is one of the few places we saw lots of people wearing traditional clothing just because that's actually what they wear everyday, not for a ceremony or a show.

We gathered the usual crowd when we laid our bikes in the dirt alongside the road in front of a shop. We got three bottles of water. I felt thirsty, weak and exhausted. Not only had we climbed over 3,000 feet, but I hadn't had much to eat in the last 24 hours.

We sat next to the road and drank our water and relaxed as about 25 faces of men, women and children stared at us. I took the opportunity to stare back. I noticed many children wearing silver bracelets and necklaces. The necklaces had a curvy M design at the end of the chain. About half the people wore the traditional dress. Others dressed like the lowland Lao with sarongs and light shirts. Some dressed in T-shirts and Nike baseball caps. Others wore a combination of all three.

We were fortunate that this group had a few ice breakers in it. A couple of old women came over and shook Joan's hand warmly, smiled a big three-tooth grin (JOAN: I didn't notice their teeth at all) and looking rather amazed that we rode those bikes all the way up there. I noticed they had heavy silver earrings that stretched their lobes to a good inch and a half long. They had the most formal dress and a lot of tassles in their hats. We felt like we had been welcomed by the matriarchs.

Another woman saw my horn and kept pointing to it. I was debating if I should play. I wanted to just keep resting. But she finally p^ointed to her ear and then the horn and then her ear again. That was a distinct request. I had to play.



I played a few tunes and didn't get much response but I didn't mind. Then a guy from the audience wanted to try. I love it when there's a guy like that. He held the horn in the most awkward position and blew hard but no sound came out. The whole village cracked up.

While I was playing a woman had told Joan, in sign language, to follow her to find food. We had to climb over a low fence to get from the road into her restaurant; I guess the fence was supposed to keep the pigs out. We sat in her small kitchen on five-inch wide benches while she cooked a soup over a wood fire. It was a good noodle soup and she was careful not to make it too spicy. She must have cooked for westerners before. On the table she had two bottles of sauce and three plastic containers of spices. One of the sauces was bright orange, the other black, like soy sauce. She poured some of each into the soup, then added a spoonful of each spice. When she got to the last spice she indicated by sucking air through her teeth that it was very hot, so we declined.

After seasoning the soup she stirred it with an up-and-down motion instead of round-and-round. She tasted each bowl to make sure it was just right. It was good. Lao and Thai food can be really good because people like her care that it's good.

While we ate four children stuck their heads through the door. I felt welcomed and comfortable in that village but I didn't want to betray them by taking out our camera and photographing everyone. It just felt wrong. But I figured I could photograph the kids. They're shy of the camera, so if nothing else, they might leave us alone. It worked pretty well. Most of them laughed and scrambled at the sight of our Canon.



The road didn't get much easier. It kept fighting the drainage. We would go down for five km then start to climb immediately. We enjoyed a very few small valleys.

At one place an enormous boulder the size of a VW Bug had fallen on the road. At another place we got to see road erosion in action when a TV-sized boulder crashed down a muddy, 10-foot high embankment, preceded by several seconds of dirt and small rocks and followed by a chunk of sod from the top of the hill.

We climbed three large hills that day for a total climb of 6,000 feet. The first hill was about 4,000 feet, the second was slightly lower, and the last was about 3,300. The only flat section of any length was the last five km into Maung Xai (pronounced Mong Sigh).

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Laos Chapter 11 - Party with the Lao Border Guards

Aug 3-6 By Eric

I can't remember being more exhausted on this trip than I was when we arrived in Maung Xai. I didn't realize how bad it was until I sat down and realized I had no intention of getting up again.

It was hard finding a place to stay that night. The first two we looked at cost only about one dollar, but weren't worth even that. The rooms were bare cells with hard and sorry looking beds that were probably full of bugs. The fixtures, floors and walls of the bathrooms were stained, scratched, peeling, cracked, and/or broken.



We were starting to get on each other's nerves so we decided to find food before continuing our search. After dinner we ended up at the nicest hotel in town, splurging, at US\$8 a night. It's hard to believe but we almost didn't stay there because of the "high" price. In a fairly typical Lao transaction, we paid in a combination of Thai Baht and US\$ and got change in Lao Kip.

This place was neat, clean, well painted, comfy. Our only complaint was the staff with the master key didn't always remember to knock before barging into the room, and many fellow guests repeatedly banged on our door late at night and early in the morning thinking it was their friends' room.

We took the next day off to rest.



Maung Xai didn't have great restaurants but it did have a great day market. A huge variety of people and produce gathered under tarps and around rows of wood tables.

The market looked ancient. The tables looked ancient. The ropes holding up the tarps were frayed and weather worn. When it rained the water drained from the tarps to all the right places. No water collected in pockets on the tarps, or poured into the middle of an aisle. It looked temporary, but like it had been temporary for a really long time.

The market was organized by product. Eggs in one place, fruit in another, veggies, raw meat, etc. A row of restaurant food stalls lined the back. It had rained hard the night before, and it rained again while we walked around, so the aisles were slick and shiny with mud. It reminded me of a county fair on a rainy day.

A more permanent concrete building had a few rooms of stalls selling packaged foods (like noodles, canned goods, hard candies), hardware (buckets, nails, hinges, padlocks), clothes, and some electronics (tape players and tapes mostly).

We bought eggs and vegetables and cooked some awesome omelets in our hotel bathroom using the camp stove. The only thing we couldn't find was salt. The "spice dealers" in the market had lots of large and small bags of different colored powder, but all the white ones turned out to be sugar.



From Maung Xai we rode to Na Mo. The hills didn't climb nearly as high as they did on the way into town but the road was in awful shape. The road had once been paved but years of no maintenance left just chunks of pavement separated by the boulders of the road bed. If we looked up long enough to see the sights, we invariably smashed into a hole. But we were lucky. At least these roads were passable. Many of the roads in northern Laos are just dirt tracks and are impossible to use in wet weather.

All day was cloudy and damp. Occasionally a light rain fell. Low gray clouds clung to the hills in the distance. At the tops of hills we rode through fog. It was one of those days where everything was gritty. Brown water filled the potholes. Bits of black grit stuck to everything. First thing in the morning, I thought, This is flat tire weather.

We've had relatively few flats in Southeast Asia. Good tires and good pressure seem to be the key. We usually check the tires every morning to make sure the pressure is high. Also I've learned to tell by the way my seat feels over bumps if either tire needs air.

When we do get flats in SE Asia, it's always on a rainy, gritty day. It had happened like that on Sumatra, in south Thailand, and the Philippines. And sure enough, it happened again that day in Laos.

I got my flat when a rock broke off a knobby from my tire and left a thin spot. Unfortunately that was my "good" tire. (My last Conti tire. I had bought it in NZ and it had about 8,000km on it when it died. If you're riding from East to West through SE Asia, get your Contis in NZ or Australia. They are not to be found anywhere in Asia). I had to put on my spare, which is not great.

Cok, the Dutchman we had met in Kasi, said he had a tire gauge and hasn't had a flat in an incredibly long time. I told him we just measure with our thumbs. He said the thumb turns out to be pretty unreliable. I think he's right. I tested the new tire with my thumb and it felt fine. But when I started riding, my seat immediately could tell it didn't have enough air

because it felt like I was riding on worms. The seat is more sensitive than the thumb.

For the next 10km I was on pins and needles that something would go wrong with the spare tire or the tube, but it didn't.

Not too many people live in the hills here. We passed through a few small Hmong villages, causing a ruckus every time. The kids went nuts, screaming and yelling and waving. Even in the wet, relatively cool weather, many of the kids still ran around stark naked. Some ran around with a shirt and no pants, while others ran around with pants and no shirt. Some dressed completely in Hmong clothing.

Around here was the first time I saw a few children with badly swollen stomachs.

We often skirted herds of cattle on the road. Water buffalo stood or sat in pools of water beside the road and collected in much smaller groups than the cows. We confused the chickens, which never seem to figure out which way to cross the road in front of us. All the towns seemed to have lots of little black-haired piglets running around and at least one giant black-haired sow. Some of the sows were so big we thought they were small water buffalo from a distance.



Not so much agriculture in these hills. Mostly dry rice and small gardens.

Na Mo was no more than a 500-meter strip of wooden buildings. Fortunately it had a guest house in a concrete building at the edge of town. We had only gone 50km but the roads were so bad it took five hours in the saddle. In the evening we bought a pineapple to have for breakfast and I tried to buy some salt but the shop woman deliberately lied and sold me sugar instead (for all of 15 cents). After tasting it we gave the sugar back to her but she didn't refund our money. Surprise, surprise.



The town had no electricity so we had a candle lit dinner served to us by a very nice woman. We ate Foe, a noodle soup, and the most readily available, consistently good meal in northern Laos.

The next morning, the roads were bad, but other than that it was a nice ride. The clouds gradually broke up and things started drying out. We bought pineapples and bananas and ate them at a pretty bridge over a raging creek. We threw the banana peels and pineapple parts into the current and watched them get swept away.

We went around some impressive black and white limestone cliffs, remnants of Karst topography, but the road didn't get too steep.

We had Foe and green tea for lunch at a truckstop. I was a hit with the horn. We turned north here, towards the little Lao town of Boten, right next to the China border.

The sun came out. The last 18km gradual climb to Boten was pretty, even though the road remained awful. We climbed stair-like from plateau to plateau. Rice paddies filled each plateau. Between the plateaus we climbed through thick forests covered with a distinctly Chinese looking vine. The vines laid over the trees like a green pearly necklace where each pearl was a leafy ball.

Boten sat in such a plateau, surrounded by rice paddies. Boten exists primarily for the border guards to have a place to stay. The border seems to employ a large number of people.

There's no electricity in Boten. Other than the "highway" it has one dirt street with about 12 or 15 ramshackle wooden houses on each side and one nice narrow new concrete Chinese-style shophouse with one shop and one home. Amazingly, Boten also has a duty free store. In addition to alcohol and cigarettes you can get film and candy. We didn't buy anything. Here they accept Lao Kip, US\$, Thai Baht and Chinese Yuan.

We stayed in a wooden restaurant that had three rooms on one side for guests to sleep in. We arrived about 3 p.m. and Joan went directly to bed to rest her back. I sat on the porch to read and watch Boten life walk by on the dirt road.

Pretty soon an English speaking border guard entered the restaurant for a meal and invited me to join him and his friends. His name was Phon. He studied English at the Police school in Vientiane and probably came by at least partly to practice English with me. He said he doesn't get many chances to use it. He spoke quite well. He said to practice he teaches the other guards for an hour after work everyday.



Later another English speaking Lao came by. She was a business woman from southern Lao on her way to China to pick up some goods for resale. She was quite sharp. I had split many large beer Laos with Phon and his friends and was not at all sharp when I met her. I kept forgetting her name and she would scold me (I still forget) and she tried to teach me to count to ten in Chinese and I kept forgetting that too.

She was a good teacher though, because she was not afraid to scold me. I really tried to concentrate and remember these things.

We showed everyone our small photo album and they took a keen interest. They look at pictures of the land behind my parent's house and asked about property taxes. Pretty soon I was trying to explain zoning. They also asked if it was true that in America couples sometimes live together before getting married.

At first I was surprised to find these English speakers in the tiny town of Boten but it sort of makes sense. The border station would probably want at least one person fluent in English.

The next morning we rode past a half dozen heavy trucks covered with canvas, their drivers sitting or standing outside smoking cigarettes. We reached a big steel pole across the road. Above the gate in a concrete booth a couple border guards stood watch.

"Eric! You may pass," one of the guards yelled down. My drinking buddy Phon happened to be on duty.

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