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Lao Aviation (International)

Your personal copy
April – June 1994

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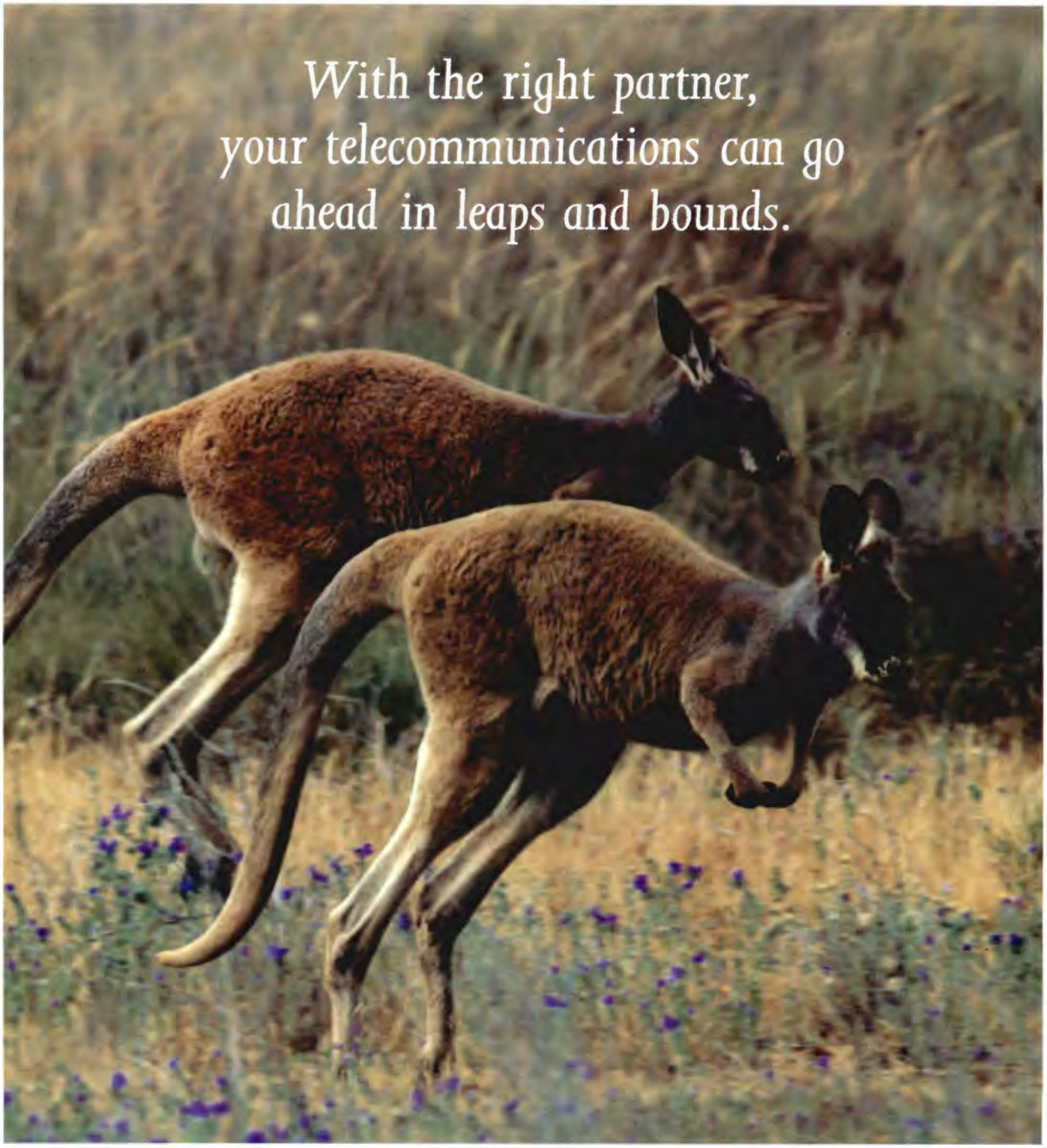

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Bun Bang Fai, or rocket festival, is a Buddhist rain ceremony which prompts the heavens to bring much-needed water to the rice fields. The Friendship Bridge (inset) opened on 23rd April 1994.

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ดอกจำปา DOK CHAMPA

Vol II No 2 April-June 1994

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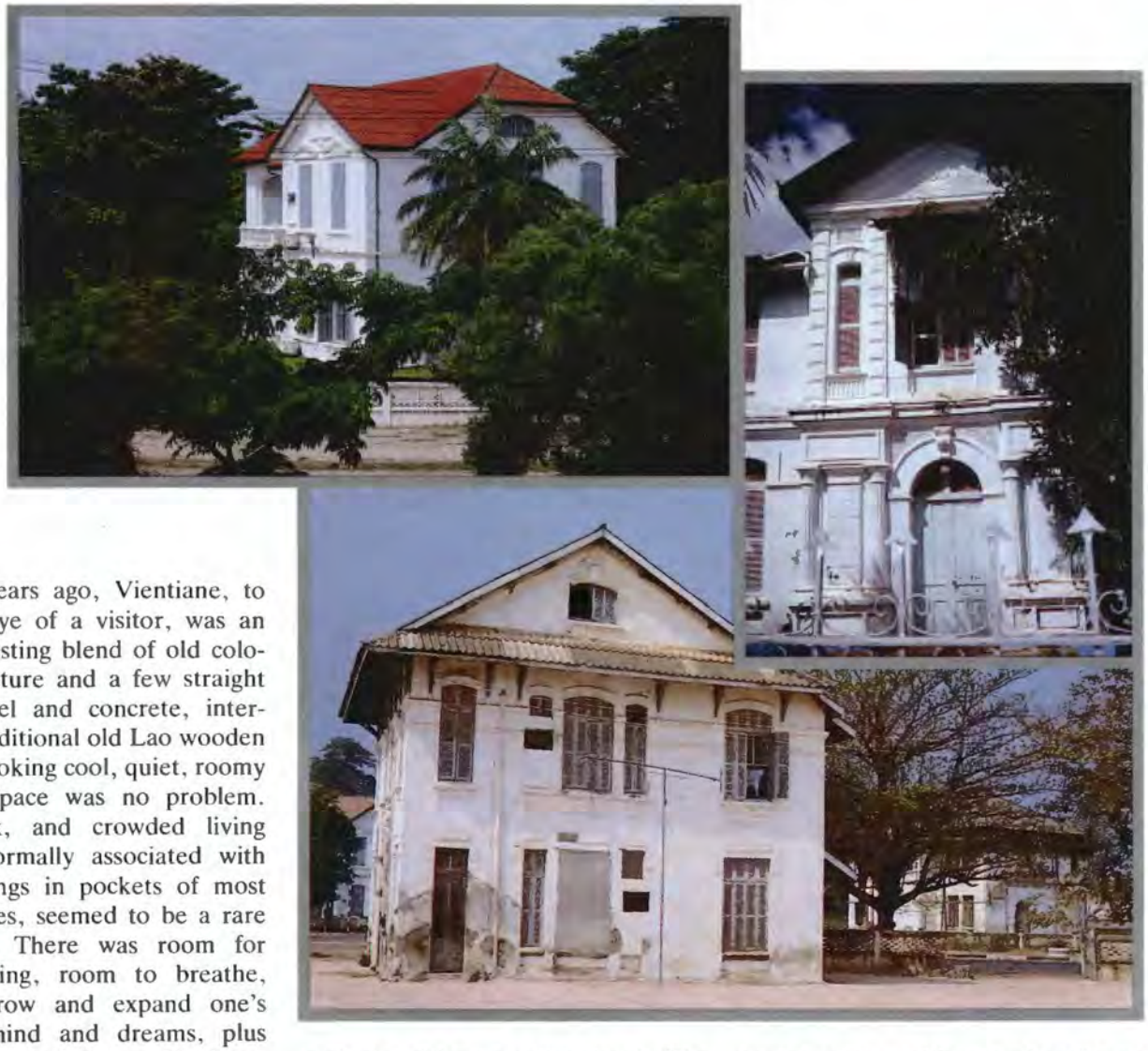
TRAVEL. DISCOVER HOW DIFFERENT WE ARE. AND HOW VERY MUCH ALIKE.

BOEING

THE GRACIOUS OLD

WRITTEN BY EHNANG



Five years ago, Vientiane, to the eye of a visitor, was an interesting blend of old colonial architecture and a few straight lines of steel and concrete, interposed by traditional old Lao wooden structures looking cool, quiet, roomy and airy. Space was no problem. Dark, dank, and crowded living quarters, normally associated with slum dwellings in pockets of most teeming cities, seemed to be a rare thing here. There was room for gracious living, room to breathe, room to grow and expand one's thoughts, mind and dreams, plus pleasing sights of old-world charm still placidly existing even on busy main streets. Unspoiled indeed was Vientiane as claimed by brochures handed out by the few existing tour agencies then.

As days and then months went by, there suddenly appeared gaps in the landscape, right in the heart of the city. One old building lending such interesting character to the city was torn down. Wiped completely off the map. Then two, and three in quick succession. Almost overnight some old houses were completely gone. No doubt the old but still sturdy houses looked shabby and dilapidated. The owners or tenants just could not manage the cost of regular maintenance. A fresh coat of paint, a few replacements in woodwork, some re-roofing was all that was needed to give the old houses the dignity of co-existing with the already changing scene around them. Just a bit of care and concern and the buildings could have gone on providing shelter for tenants while adding charm and grace to Vientiane. But it was not to be.

In the name of progress and development, some quick-witted businessmen, with no thought or feeling for the grace and beauty of the old world charm but only seeing things in terms of cold hard cash, had bought them outright and demolished them, leaving ugly scars where used to stand gracious beauty. For some reason unknown to ordinary citizens, quick as they were in destroying something beautiful, they were slow in replacing it with the promised something new.

So the scars in Vientiane remain, with huge billboards proclaiming the fact that multi-storeyed modern steel and concrete structures bristling with

up-to-date facilities would soon stand there in place of the old homes once filled with the warmth and cheer of family lives. Are these touches of old-world grace and charm soon to be lost forever to Vientiane?

Then came heartening news like a breath of fresh air. The government had decreed that old structures and sites considered to be of historic value be placed under protection in a move to preserve the heritage of the past. Many citizens who place great value on the heritage of their forefathers heaved a deep sigh of sheer relief.

At the same time, as a result of a much-needed development scheme, Vientiane citizens woke up on the morning of 20th March 1994 to the buzz of the new digital telephone system giving better efficiency and capable of International Direct Dialing (IDD). Hooray for the success of this communication development in Laos. Kudos to all personnel involved in bringing this communication upgrading to Laos. Nevertheless, I could not help thinking of the loss of the human touch.

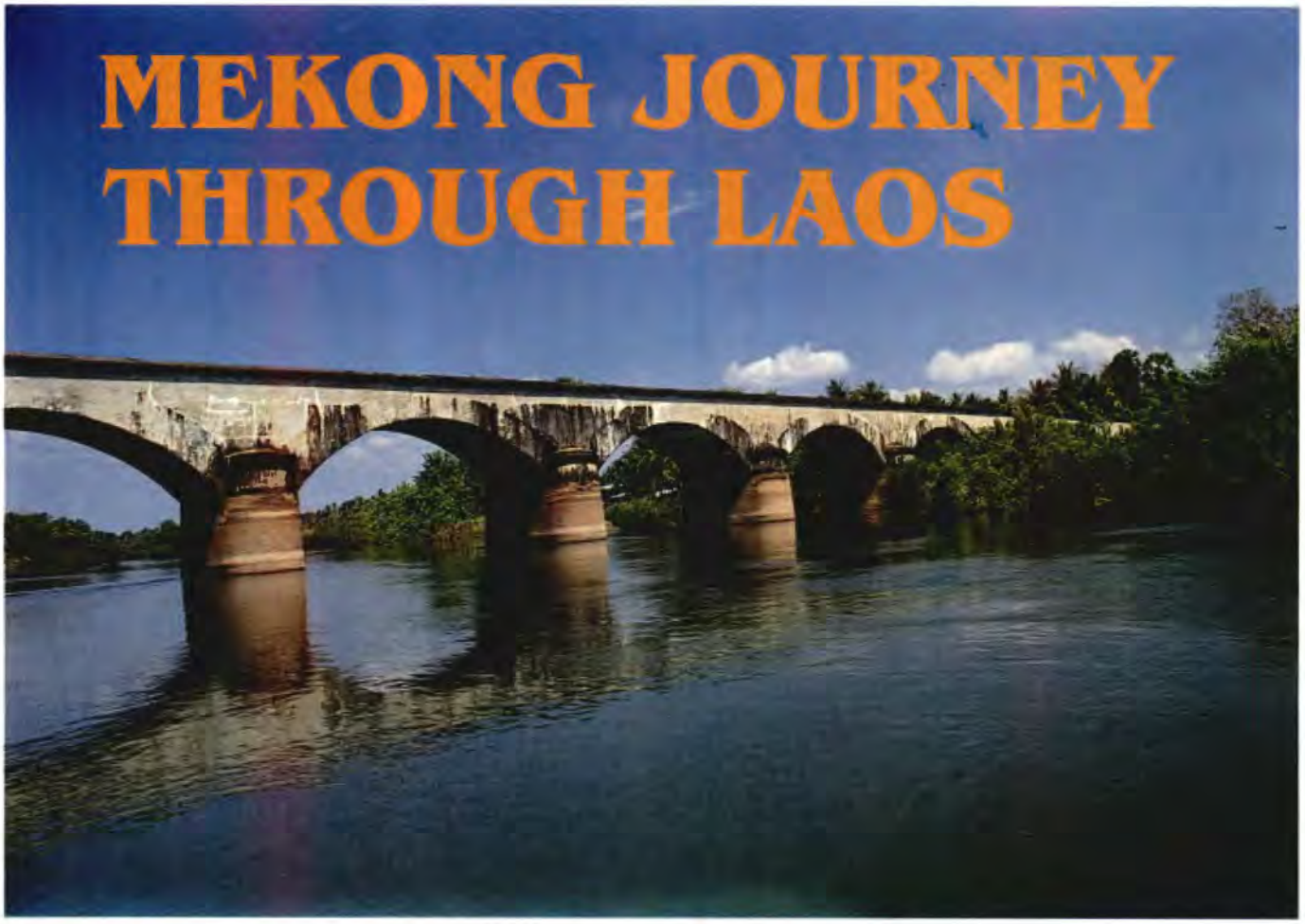
Gone will be the human voice answering one's queries, be it smiling and alert or drowsy and grouchy, when trying to book an overseas call. No more blaming a third person, no more ranting and raving at an unfortunate operator for the many frustrations encountered in putting through an overseas call. Now it's entirely up to you, whether you

succeed or fail when dialing direct to an overseas number. You will have only yourself to blame or applaud. That's the result of one facet of progress in communications. This is cold modern electronics replacing the old telephone system with the human touch.

It was indeed a privilege to have been on the scene to record these changes in Vientiane. Human beings normally learn to adapt to changes.

The good and even the not so good. Just as some will welcome any new change in the name of development, without question there are bound to be a few who still dwell on the good side of the old. At the risk of being sniffed at by those always ready to embrace the new and the modern at whatever price, one small and perhaps old part of my mind still sighs and maintains that, in some ways, old will always be gracious. ■

MEKONG JOURNEY THROUGH LAOS



WRITTEN BY JOHN HOSKIN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALLEN W. HOPKINS

Riverboat skipper Chan Phoummy scanned the water ahead, and made constant minor adjustments to his course, twitching the wheel a fraction port or starboard. A slightly-built, middle-aged man, Chan has piloted boats along the Mekong in Laos for 25 years, yet he never takes the river for granted. "It's always changing. No two journeys are the same," he said.

When we left Luang Prabang that morning, the Mekong had been broad, its coffee-coloured surface calm as a lake. Now it had narrowed and the water was becoming increasingly troubled, ruffled white by submerged rocks.

"You'd better walk this part. Every year there are accidents here," Chan warned and pulled the boat into the bank.

Scrambling along the rocky shore, my companions and I watched as the 22-metre wooden boat was skillfully brought pitching and rolling through the 500 metres of white water that swirled between a dog leg of rocks.

Only part of the Mekong's 4,200-kilometre passage lies in Laos and yet it is this country which seems to belong most to the river. A sinuous thread running through the nation's historical and cultural fabric, the Mekong has helped shape Lao's past and holds a key to its future.

The Land of a Million Elephants, as Laos was originally known, grew up on the banks of the Mekong which flows through or borders the nation's entire western flank. Luang Prabang, the old royal city founded in the 14th century overlooks the river. So, too, does the modern capital, Vientiane.

With 70 per cent of Lao territory taken up by mountain ranges, highlands and plateau, the Mekong is the economic life-line. Its flood plains provide the major wet-rice lands; its waters yield fish, the main source of protein; its passage of well over 1,500 kilometres affords the only communication link running north-south through the whole country.

As to the future, much of the

Mekong's enormous hydroelectric power potential lies in Laos as it is this mountainous region which provides most of the water in the river's lower basin. Dams are, of course, controversial issues in today's world, but if the huge hydroelectric generating capacity of the Mekong were tapped, Laos, currently one of the world's poorest countries, could reap staggering revenues. Even now a hydroelectric dam on the Nam Ngum tributary near Vientiane has for several years been a major foreign-exchange earner through power exports to Thailand.

Yet like the country itself, for long shutting itself off from the outside world, the Mekong retains an air of mystery and romance. No dam slows its passage, and only now, since April 1994, has a bridge spanned its banks. Travelling the river remains, as I discovered, a journey of exploration, timeless in its enchantment.

It began, improbably enough amid Thailand's burgeoning tourism industry at the so-called "Golden Triangle", where the Mekong and the tiny Ruak tributary momentarily bring together the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. Here the Thai banks bristle with an obtrusive tourism infrastructure – a jumble of restaurants, trashy stalls, guesthouses and deluxe hotels. Across the river Laos was different; quiet and empty with jungle vegetation.

There is no crossing point here, so we headed 80 kilometres downstream to Chiang Khong. The long-tailed boat we hired was to be our last taste of the modern world for the next four days. Freshly varnished and with funky green plastic cushions, it was kitsch but fun. The propeller, at the end of a long shaft, was driven by a 1,300 cc Toyota Car engine and the boatman, perched on a box next to this excess of power, proudly shouted above the din that he could get up to 100 kilometre per hour.

The Golden Triangle quickly vanished and the Mekong enveloped us. The river cut a course between high wooded hills, sometimes receding, more often hemming us in. Even in the dry season, before

the Mekong becomes swollen by the monsoon rains, the current is swift. An old man had told me how the river can be "hungry" for a human soul. Local belief has it that if the Mekong does not claim a victim, the rains will not come and so the rice crop will fail.

We arrived safely, however, at the Thai settlement of Chiang Khong and took a ferry across to the Lao twin town of Ban Houei Sai. At this energetic little riverport, where black-dressed Hmong tribespeople mingle with the lowland Lao, we joined Chan Phoummy's boat for a four-day run down to Vientiane via Luang Prabang, a journey of 757 kilometres. Our transport was a typical Lao wooden river boat, 22-metres long, two metres wide, with a wheel house at the bows, tiny toilet and cooking area at the stern and in between, beneath a flat roof, an empty hull.

Discomforts were, however, forgotten once we were underway. Although fairly narrow in these parts, the Mekong is exciting, flowing through wild, beautiful hill country.

After skirting the Thai border for a while, we headed east into Laos. The scenery became if anything even more spectacular and we met little on the river or its banks to detract from a feeling of isolation in a lost world. The sensation was not banished by the night's stop at Pak Beng. This, the largest river settlement between Ban Houei Sai and Luang Prabang, is a collection of some 500 wooden houses nestling in the folds of the steep hills which trap the river in a narrow passage. It is an eerily isolated spot, given substance only by the river.

Throughout the next day the river maintained a stunning passage through a narrow valley. Forested mountains loomed on both sides, their slopes here and there ablaze as villagers burnt off the scrub to prepare the land for cultivation. Wisps of smoke curled over the surface of the water while ash-like flakes of black snow played in the air.

Traffic was few and far between and only occasionally did we pass other boats. Most were of the same design as ours, all were ladened with people, goods and even water buffalo. Now and then we spotted fishermen casting their nets from rocks, their solitude striking as villages were rarely seen.

By afternoon, we reached the mouth of the Nam Ou tributary where the Mekong curves to head south. The point is marked on the right bank by a sheer cliff into which is set Tham Ting, a 400-year-old cave temple. Stacked with hundreds of Buddha images, this is an especially sacred spot, once the venue for an annual celebration presided over by the King of Laos.

On the final stretch down to Luang Prabang, the river widens and there were more boats, more people. And gold, too. Camping out on the sandbanks were scores of families who for half the year are farmers but turn gold prospectors during the dry season, digging pay dirt out of shallow pits and washing it in wooden trays at the river's edge. With luck there will be tiny flecks of gold glittering amid the blackish sand. One prospector claimed he found on average a gramme of gold a day.

After cave temples and gold seekers, Luang Prabang was a fitting terminus to an enchanted day. Shaded by trees and with an imposing site on the banks of the Mekong where it is joined by the Nam Khan river, this ancient royal city appeared to have changed little since travel writer Norman Lewis described it in 1950:

"Luang Prabang, on its tongue of land where the rivers meet, was a tiny Manhattan, but a Manhattan with holy men with yellow robes in its

avenues, with pariah dogs, and garlanded pedicabs carrying somnolent Frenchmen nowhere, and doves in its sky. Down at the lower tip, where Wall Street should have been, was a great congestion of monasteries."

Life is, of course,somewhat different now – the Frenchmen have been long gone and no king resides at the royal palace. Yet the mist-shrouded mountains have stood as mute sentinels and the city's fabric endures as an outpost of old Asia.

Leaving Luang Prabang in the early morning, we were immediately plunged into a scene from Conrad. Mist rising like steam from the still water enveloped us, reducing visibility to but a few feet. Twice we had to stop. With the engines cut, the heavy silence conspired with the mist to wall us in. For half an hour, we waited until the weather cleared and slowly the river took form.

The most remarkable feature of the Mekong in this stretch is its vastly varying widths. From placid passages several hundred metres across, it will suddenly change mood and angrily tumble through rocky narrows. Yet it is an enchanting passage. Of the river here, explorer Henri Mouhot wrote in 1860: "In this part of the country...it everywhere runs between lofty mountains, down whose sides flow torrents, all bringing their tribute. There is almost an excess of grandeur. The eye rests constantly on these mountain slopes, clothed in the richest and thickest verdure."

For two days, with an overnight stop in the fairly prosperous river port of Pak Lay, our view was the same as Mauhot's. Only after the river had swung east for its run to Vientiane were we brought back to the 20th century. The right bank once again became the Thai border, exposing the startling extent of later-day deforestation. Gone is Mouhot's rich and thick verdure and Thailand's hills are as bald as a bathing cap. In vivid contrast, the Lao side remains wooded, but for how long, I wondered.

Gradually, the hills recede and the valley broadens. Arriving at Vien-

tiane at dusk was a disappointment. After Luang Prabang, the modern Lao capital seems an eccentric kind of place, a provincial town posing as a capital city. All but the main streets seem countrified with tree-lined grass verges, and a tranquil air is disturbed by little more than a passing bicycle.

There was little to keep me in the city and I was anxious to move on to see the final Lao stretch of the Mekong and one of its wonders, the Khone Falls. This is the largest waterfall on the entire river and the most formidable barrier to navigation.

The name Khone is used loosely and there are actually two principal cascades, Phacheng Falls and Somphamit Falls. These are but the two most dramatic features in a 13-kilometre stretch of rapids that form perhaps the single most wondrous passage of the Mekong.

Just before the river enters Cambodia it divides into several channels at the huge island of Khong. The distance between the westernmost and easternmost streams is 14 kilometres, the greatest width assumed by the river throughout its 4,200-kilometre course. Downstream of Khong numerous other smaller islands, of which Khone is one, create a maze of channels, some placid creeks, others raging torrents where the river plunges over rocks in a mad rush to get beyond these obstacles and continue a more leisurely journey.

With no time to travel the Mekong's long middle reach in Laos, I flew from Vientiane to Pakse, gateway to Khone. This provincial capital, located on the left bank of the river at the junction of the Se Done tributary, is a major Mekong town, a crossroads for both road and river traffic.

Backed by a steep escarpment, the town is dominated by the former palace of Prince Boun Oum of Champasak, a delirious building of Oriental wedding cake architecture. Viewed close up, however, it was all too apparent that Pakse has seen better days. A handful of dilapidated colonial-period buildings lend an air of old-world charm, but the sights are quickly exhausted.

Far more delightful was Khinak, 136 kilometres downstream. The last riverine settlement of any note before the Cambodian border, Khinak is much smaller and much more charming than Pakse; the kind of place that makes you understand why the French colonials thought Laos an earthly paradise. At sunset children came to play in the river and sarong-clad women bathed with delicacy and grace.

Below Khinak the Mekong ceases to be its usual placid self. Disgruntled at having to find diverse paths between a hundred or so islands, both small and large, inhabited and uninhabited, it assumes an agitated mien along a series of channels, some extremely dangerous in parts. Attractive and deadly in these turbulent waters is the Phapheng Falls, 36 kilometres south of Khinak. Suddenly, without warning, a deceptively languid arm of the river crashes 15 metres over a rocky cascade into a maelstrom of white water.

A classic waterfall in appearance, Phapheng is intensely picturesque; Somphamit Falls, is not. Located upstream on a different branch of the river at the northern edge of Khone Island, it is set amid a mass of jagged rocks. Here the Mekong forces an

angry passage in a series of cascades as opposed to Phapheng's single drop. It was thrilling enough now at low water, but my guide described an awesome sight in the rainy season when it throws up sheets of spray to the accompaniment of a continuous thunderous roar.

At the same time as marvelling at a wonder of the Mekong, I couldn't help being unnerved by this inhospitable face of the river. It was not difficult to share the utter despair the sight struck in the hearts of Doudart de Lagree and Francis Garnier, leaders of an expedition up the Mekong in the 1860s. It was at Khone that these French explorers saw their dream of a river road to China vanish, Never an easy river to navigate, the Mekong is impassable at Khone.

Standing here and remembering my travels upstream, I could only agree with Garnier's generous description of the Mekong which had beaten him: "Without doubt, no other river, over such a length, has a more singular or remarkable character." ■

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LAOS AND AUSTRALIA JOIN IN FRIENDSHIP

WRITTEN BY BILLIE HAY
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAMES MICHENER

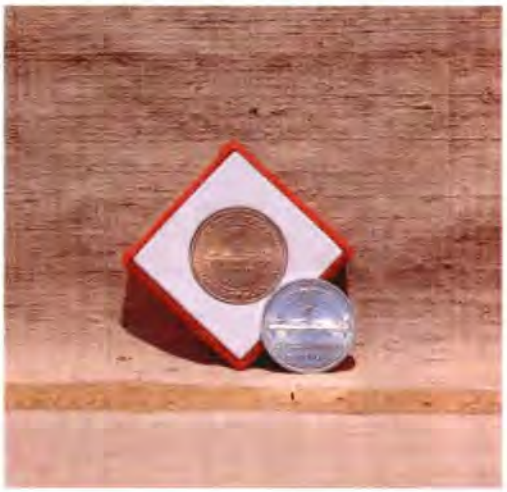
In the haze of the morning, the long elegant spans of the Mekong River Friendship Bridge create a splendid vision to the observer. That this modern transport link, crossing a once difficult and dangerous international boundary is at all in existence, is an understated credit to all who were involved in the planning and construction of this powerful symbol of peace and progress in the region.

A bridge across the great Mekong River has long been considered a key ingredient to the economic and social progress of the area, setting the stage for its catapult into the boom that is Asia today. Landlocked Laos, with its borders providing gateways to every other country in the Indochina region, was in a unique position to take advantage of its geographical location. The Mekong River, from its

birthplace in the freezing crystal-clear springs of the Tibetan Plateau to its final outpouring into the South China Sea in the south of Vietnam, has always been a vital transportation link for those who made their life along its fertile banks. To have a modern link across the river would open up vital land routes to boost trade in the region.

As long ago as the late 1950s, proposal for a bridge across the Mekong River were put forward by the United States and in early 1960s a combined road and rail proposal for a bridge with a continued rail link to Vientiane was submitted by the Japanese. Although a bridge was deemed feasible, the long legacy of political instability in Indochina prevented the concept from becoming reality until the late 1980s. It was during this period that the 'open door' policies of the New Economic Mechanism started to have an effect on the attitudes and lifestyles of the Lao as they cautiously opened their border with Thailand and allowed other foreign investors into the country.

In January 1989 the then Prime Minister of Australia Bob Hawke offered to provide a bridge across the Mekong River as a gift equally to Laos and Thailand. Australia was one of the few western countries to maintain an embassy in Vientiane throughout the uncertainties of seventies and eighties, and was thus



welcomed as a third party to keep the project focussed.

In his speech at the Inauguration of Construction of the Mekong River Bridge on 24th November 1991 the Minister for Trade and Overseas Development, Dr Neal Blewett stressed the commitment that Australia had in the peace and prosperity of the Indochina region. He expressed a belief that in making the decision to fund the bridge, Australia "might not only do something that was practical and right, but would light a path of peace in the region and inspire others to take changes, to go the extra distance that was required, if we were to create a new era of peace in Indochina – a fertile and fabled part of our world".

The bridge is part of Australia's aid programme to both countries, a programme which aims to promote sustainable economic and social advancement, in response to Australia's humanitarian concerns and in line with foreign policy and commercial interests. To alleviate poverty and to increase the quality of life is a fundamental and intrinsic goal. With Australia's contribution of A$42 million (about US$30 million), the bridge will enhance Laos' strategic location and with the expected increase in trade and investment, the country will be able to generate

capital to invest in education, health care and employment.

The project was scheduled to begin in April 1990 and initial estimates were that completion would be achieved in June 1994 (although construction was completed ahead of schedule – February 1994). A joint venture of two respected Australian firms, Maunsell Pty Ltd and Sinclair Knight Pty Ltd, was selected as the engineering consultants and, after public tender, the John Holland Group was given the task of the construction of the bridge. After a feasibility Study Update was carried out in 1990 which looked into, among others, environmental and social impacts and the future management of the bridge, actual construction got underway in October 1991.

The 1174-metre bridge is designed to carry two lanes of traffic with provision for a future railway along the centreline. The massive concrete structure was fabricated using a balanced-cantilever method. This simply means that segments are added onto each side of a pier so that it looks like a gigantic see-saw. Once the arms of a particular see-saw have gone as far as they can on either side of a pier, work begins on another pier. Where the two ends of adjoining see-saws meet, a segment is made insitu to close the gap.

Apart from the actual bridge itself, the work also involves the building of approach roads with a traffic changeover on the Lao side since the Lao drive on the right and the Thai on the left side of the road. The labour force on the bridge, reflecting Australia's commitment to providing the local workforce with skills for the future, comprised about 20 Australians and a further 400 Lao and Thai workers engaged by the contractors and subcontractors.

It is important to keep in mind that the bridge is only one player on

OPENING OF THE FRIENDSHIP BRI
THAILAND-LAOS

THE FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE : A FACTSHEET

1. The main bridge structure is of a pre-stressed, post tensioned concrete single box girder design, constructed using a match cast segmental balanced-cantilever method. There are six river piers and seventeen land piers.
2. Length of the bridge is 1174 metres.
3. Length is the main structure is 665 metres.
4. The main span length is 105 metres.
5. Width of the bridge deck is 12.7 metres.
6. The bridge carriageway has two 3.5 metre wide traffic lanes, two 1.5 metre footpaths and provision for a future railway track down the centre.
7. Length of approach embankment is 650 meters in Lao PDR and 730 metres in Thailand.
8. River bank protection has been put in place for 700 metres on the Lao PDR river bank.
9. The Construction Contractor is John Holland Constructions and the Engineer's Representative is Maunsell Sinclair Knight Partners Joint Venture.The executing authority for the Lao PDR is the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction, and for Thailand, the Department of Energy Development and Promotion, Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment.
10. Total grant from Australia for feasibility studies, design and construction is A$42 million.

the very wide stage of progress. Although it is without doubt that its presence will have a significant impact on the economy and social structure of Laos, the bridge itself cannot be seen as the sole contributor to change in Laos – it is but a catalyst for stronger forces. Progress can be bewildering and with this in mind, the late President of Laos, Mr Kaysone Phomvihane, requested that a study be conducted on the negative impacts of the bridge so that these could be identified and eliminated or minimalised.

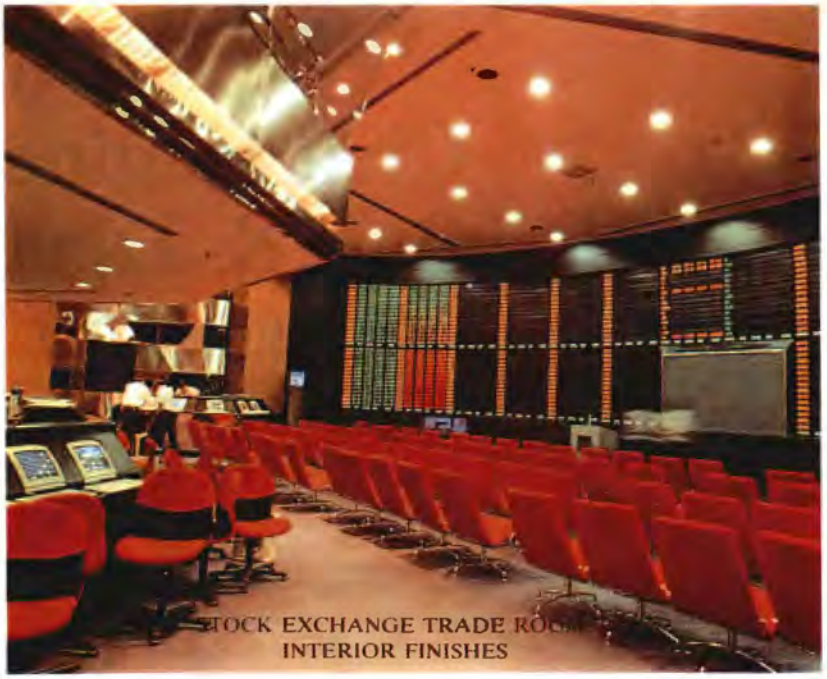
In early March 1994 a one-day seminar was held to discuss various impacts of the bridge, and in particular to discuss the negative aspects of the bridge. The participants, who were from a range of Lao government agencies and some private bodies, were overwhelmingly positive about the role of the bridge. The major issues of concern were the build-up of traffic and therefore an increase in road accidents and the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Other areas that were discussed were the streamlining of customs and immigration procedures and the regulation of tourism. From the frank discussions that ensued, it was obvious that much was being done to tackle these issues and the authorities concerned were working hard to meet problems head-on with practical solutions and long term planning.

At a most unique opening ceremony on 8th April 1994 presided over by the President of Laos and the King of Thailand, the Prime Minister of Australia formally presented the bridge to the peoples and the government of Laos and Thailand. The Prime Ministers of those two countries were also present. It was a proud occasion for all those who had worked on so successful a project, not only in the physical construction of the works, but also in the less tangible areas of building up

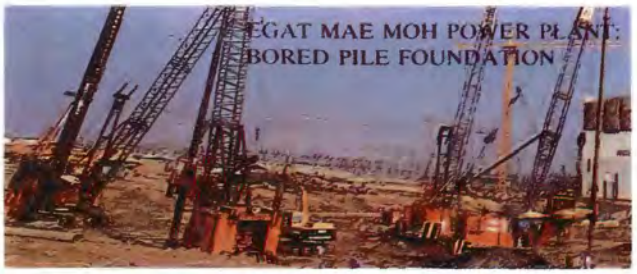
friendships and strengthening ties between the three nations.

From start to finish, a strong spirit of cooperation has prevailed, bringing individuals closer and spurring the three countries on to a higher plane of understanding. The bridge has become one of the most powerful and true symbols of peace and stability that has emerged in Indochina for decades. ■

KIN SUN THAILAND CONSTRUCTION



- BORED PILES
- DRIVEN PILES
- CAST-IN-PLACE PILES
- BRIDGE WORKS
- DIAPHRAGM WALLS
- FACTORY COMPLEX
- SECANT PILE WALLS
- PORTS AND HARBOURS
- ROAD AND RAIL WORKS
- BASEMENT CONSTRUCTION
- QUALITY HIGH RISE BUILDINGS
- PIPE LAYING AND WELDING WORKS
- RECLAMATION AND SITE FORMATION



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Watch Out World: Here Comes Laos!

WRITTEN BY ROBERT MANGEL
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAMES MICHENER

For six months in 1989 the Lao government experimented with an open-door policy towards tourism. Then it closed the door.I was one of the lucky few who stumbled into Laos that year. Compared with today – the Lao Ministry of Interior abolished travel passes with the stroke of a pen during March – getting around Laos was extremely difficult for the Lao citizens as well as foreigners.

For example, five years ago a somewhat infamous guesthouse in Nong Khai had put out a hand-drawn map called "The Northern Trip of Laos". With fair accuracy, it showed even the neophyte how to manoeuvre by land from Vientiane to Luang Prabang – the Lonely Planet Indochina guidebook, with its section devoted to Laos, wasn't to be published for another two years.

I myself was one of those neophytes (about "things Laotian" anyway) and was handed the map, much worn and many times folded, by a backpacker (I myself carried a Samsonite) in the old shop-house-size immigration office of the Ministry of Interior next door to the Joint Development Bank. Several days later, in mist and rain, I was on my uncertain way.

According to the map, first you took a bus (there were two in the morning and one in the afternoon) from Vientiane's morning market to Thalat near Ang (lake) Nam Ngum for two-and-a-half hours for 210 kip. Second, you took a 30-minute local taxi ride from Thalat to Nam Ngum for 150 kip. Third, the "ferry boat ride" (that's what the guesthouse called it) across the Nam Ngum took three hours and cost 300 kip. Fourth, from Ban Thahuea or Ban Houayma (both on the opposite shore) the journey continued to Van Vieng for one hour and cost 300 kip. All told: 960 kip (not much more than one dollar) and seven outright fascinating hours. This left Luang Prabang 2,500 kip (slightly more than three dollars) and 14 hours 260 kilometres) farther north.

Interestingly, there was another way to travel directly northward without crossing Ang Nam Ngum. This route took you to Van Vieng as well: by truck (yes,truck) and the estimated time was seven or eight hours (that is, maybe an hour longer than what would seem at first glance

to be a convoluted route – the Nam Ngum passage requiring three modes of transportation). Well, Route 13 North was then that bad. I know;I took the "road less travelled by" (in case you have forgotten, the words are Robert Frost's) even though advised not to by a well-meaning Indian road engineer whom I met by chance at Breakfast at the Lane-Xang Hotel that August.

Laos was an adventure in 1989 (and indeed still is for what might be called Lao hands and newcomers alike). But for the Lao government as well as some embassies, tourist gambolling about the countryside were a real nightmare then. Then said a travel advisory (memorandum actually) dated 10th July 1989 and posted for all to see in the consulate section of a large western embassy in Bangkok: "Those of us accustomed to the small foreign community in Vientiane hardly know how to react these days. Everywhere we turn, it seems, tourists gawk and stroll, backpackers plod. Not even an evening's quiet jog is free from the hearty 'howdy' of a passel of farang.

"A sight they may be to us, but a concern they are becoming to our Australian and Swedish nurses. Carmel Sullivan and Inger Pettersen wearily attest to the tourists' growing numbers, and dryly to their foolhardiness. Upcountry they gaily backpack, and feverishly they return to seek solace and treatment from our medical establishment! They tipple "lao-lao", a poisonous brew, and worse, "Lao-hai" is an unfermented rice wine pressed without the least smidgen of Pasteur's findings!

"And they hop, blithely, onto northbound trucks, the beauties of Luang Prabang to savour, all innocent that they may meet fatal dangers by the way of brigands on the long, mountainous road.

"But how do they get here? It's apparently easy. Bt1,000 to selected travel agents in Patpong, Sukhumvit and Nong Khai will procure a visa over the river. It cost us Bt300 to get a tourist visa for friends at the Lao Embassy, so someone is earning a tidy fee on Sathorn Tai – no doubt for services rendered.

"Tourists are welcome – at least, to us. But this is a land of minimal, at

best, medical, hotel and administrative infrastructure. A mite of caution would not be bad counsel."

Now it's five years later. The President of Laos and the King of Thailand have officially opened the Lao-Thai Friendship bridge. Visas are suddenly available to businessmen and tourists "on arrival" at all border crossings (not just Wattay airfield or Tha Deua). The laissez passer (travel pass) is dead as a dinosaur. And Vientiane's travel agents are complaining of an inadequate supply of airconditioned buses for their minions who now sometimes flow across the Mekong in greater numbers daily than the two flights from Bangkok on Tuesdays and Thursdays combined.

The pictures accompanying this article prove that the national government hasn't been asleep at the switch regarding moving herds of well-heeled visitors around – a note to all tourists, keep your "platinum" American Express cards handy. While quite a few foreign banks opened last year, and several bridges opened (and are opening) this year, next year many, many roads will have been wholly rebuilt from their foundation up – already you can drive to Van Vieng (160 kilometres) in not much more time than it takes to pack a picnic lunch,change into casual clothes, and top off the Toyota. (For those of you interested in statistics, here's a revealing one: "Regarding the government's 1991 to 1996 Public Investment Programme, 92 per cent of the 38 per cent allocated to the transport sector (the

highest of all sectors) is devoted to road investment, and much international assistance is being provided in addition," says consultant Georgina Carnegie.)

The hoopla for the Friendship bridge (originally conceived in 1956) was certainly deserved. But it is worth noting that a Friendship Highway (Thai Route 2) was built several decades ago on the opposite side of the river and to this day still runs 620 concrete kilometres from Nong Khai to Bangkok. In fact, it's in the process of being dramatically widened. A telling footnote about this highway is the fact that traffic engineers initially underestimated its inaugural use by about 4 to 1. In other words, when 1,000 vehicles were expected to use the highway in any given week, no less than 4,000 drove upon it! (The origin of Bangkok's gridlock?)

So it wasn't really wishful thinking after all on the part of Australia's Transfield when they decided to build a high-tech 200-metre-long private-venture toll bridge across the Nam River at Tha Ngon on a build-own-operate-transfer basis. This is the direct route to Switzerland-like Ang Nam Ngum. This is the direct route to Cameroon Highlands-Phou Khao Khouai. This is the direct route across the Vientiane alluvial plain to such places as the Vientiane Zoological gardens where (some say) a thousand species of orchids thrive and a like number of hot-weather deer ramble in the Lao wild. Even now, none of these areas is more than a two-hour drive from Vientiane.

These three sites are obviously jewels in the national tourist authority's crown, which is why foresighted American Express has its agent in the capital already. (Transfield, by the way, also constructed the Border Control Facility on the Lao side of the Mekong at the foot of the Friendship Bridge. "It is also a sponsor and lead developer," said John McGarry, chief executive for Transfield International, "of the privately financed 600MW Nam Theun 2 hydro power station which, when complete,will provide substantial benefits to the Laotian economy.")

Last but not least,for equally spectacular scenery, put in on your 1996 Lao agenda to motor down Skanska's two-stage road rebuilding project from Vientiane-Thabok and Thabok-Pakkading. In fact, go now if, reminiscent of World War Two movies like "The Bridge Over the River Kwai", you want to see the still-in-use assortment of picturesque Bailey bridges before they're altogether demolished. Using the latest in Swedish road-building techniques and equipment, Skanska is enabling the indigenous Lao farmer to market his crops at 20th-century speed. (Remember, the Lao farmer has much more water at his disposal for irrigation than his cousin across the Mekong. For Lao farmers, an enormous market – the population

of Thailand now stands at 58 million – finally lies accessible across the Friendship Bridge.)

Someone recently wrote: "There was no Berlin Wall to pull down in Southeast Asia, so no single event has marked the gradual reintegration of the region. Instead, its coming together is marked by a series of small events: a border-crossing opened, a new flight available there. Gradually, the parts of the region that have not enjoyed Asia's economic boom are beginning to join in."

Watch out, world: here comes Laos! Or more likely Laos can wait for the over-populated world to come to it: for its abundant minerals, for its abundant water resources, for its pristine tourist attractions, for the crops that can be grown on its verdant and under-populated soil. Or as Georgian Carnegie likes to state the case: "It is now possible to locate a business in Laos and reach a possible market of over 200 million consumers residing within 100 kilometres of lao borders".

Seen from the Mekong's left bank, time is another ace up the long Lao sleeve. Any time now, Laos is a gold mine waiting to happen; in fact, a good number of prospectors are already here and the count is rapidly growing. ■

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Lao Cuisine

The Raw and the Cooked

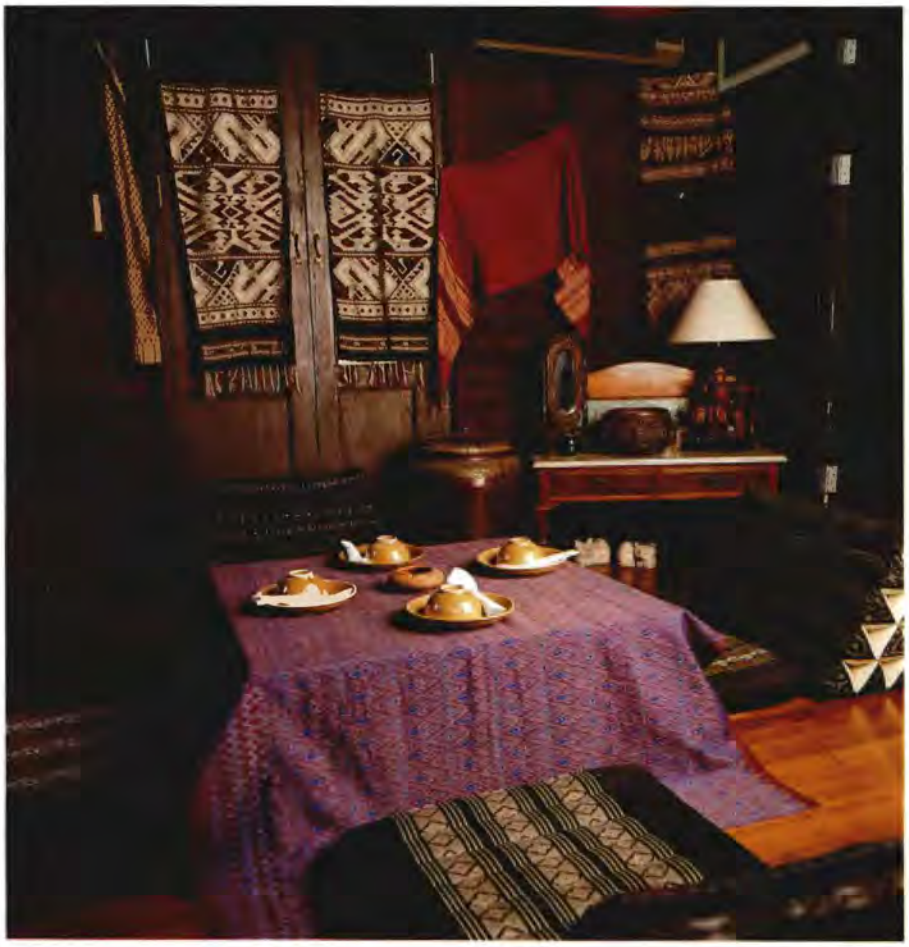
WRITTEN BY GRANT EVANS

Sitting down to the bowl of chopped raw meat, a chicken's head, a salad made of free and shrub leaves, and sticky rice interspersed with rounds of fiery home-made rice whisky is not the normal traveller's idea of a mouth-watering exotic meal.

But the occasional visitor to Laos is unlikely to experience such really distinctive Lao food. That is, the Lao taste for things raw rather than cooked. This preference tells you many things about Lao culture and society: for instance, the proximity of most Lao to the "wild" forest where food is still hunted or gathered. A deer shot in the mountains is carried back to the village where it is chopped up into many bowls for *laap* and the family's neighbours and friends come and feast and drink. The whole deer is consumed immediately because there are no refrigerators in the villages to keep the meat fresh. Even in the 'civilised' cooked haute cuisine of Laos the presence of ingredients from the "wild" forest makes it different from Thai food.

For the travellers coming from Bangkok, the most immediate difference they will notice between Thai and Lao food is the use of sticky, or glutinous rice (*klao niaw*) at every meal. At a Lao meal it is usually served during the meal and each person takes a small handful of the rice which they knead into a ball and either dip it into one of the dishes of condiments or eat it plain. When Lao go off to work in the fields or elsewhere you will often see hanging at their side a small version of these round woven baskets in which they carry a supply of sticky rice and perhaps a small amount of fish or meat which will serve as a mid-day meal. Lao believe that most foreigners do not like to eat sticky rice and prefer ordinary rice (*klao chao*) so you may have to ask for it especially.

Along with *klao niaw* there is another essential ingredient in a Lao meal, and one which the Lao tend to use as an ethnic marker. This is *pa daek*, a highly pungent fermented fish sauce. On the back verandah of



every Lao peasant's house you will find an earthenware jar of *pa daek*. Books and tourist brochures are often likely to refer to Laos as the "Land of a Million Elephants", but ordinary Lao are more likely to call it the land of *khao niaw* and *pa daek*.

The second distinctive dish of the Lao is *laap*. It is made with fish, chicken, duck, pork, beef, buffalo or with game. The meat and innards are finely chopped and spiced with onion, chillies, and other herbs such as mint. The Lao prefer *laap seua*, or "Tiger laap", that is raw chopped meat. But most often you will be served laap of cooked meat, especially in restaurants.

At other times you are likely to be offered a rice vermicelli, or *klao poun*. This is served cold with a variety of raw chopped vegetables, on which one pours coconut milk sauce flavoured with meat and chillies. It is a favourable dish at wedding and other celebrations, and a favourite with foreigners.

A lovely regional dish is the *Or lam* from Luang Prabang. This is about as close as the Lao get to something like European stew. Lemon grass, dried buffalo meat and skin, chillies and eggplant along with some pa daek are basic ingredients, but the really distinctive feature is the addition of crisp-fried pork skin and sweet basil.

Soup is also essential at any Lao meal, though one will not find the lovely seafood soups from which Thai cuisine is famous. Try keng *no may*, a bamboo shoot soup, or *keng het bot* made with mushrooms.

Interestingly, one of the most popular ordinary meals eaten by the Lao is a dish of Vietnamese origin, *feu*. This is an economical combination of vermicelli in hot soup filled with meatballs. It is served with a dish of vegetable leaves which you tear up and stir into your feu according to taste. A Lao will pour in a large helping of fish sauce, chilli sauce and sprinkle it with sugar. But all of this is according to personal taste. If you are on the road and stop at a wayside eatery, this is usually all that will be available.

There are many fish dishes in Laos, but one, unhappily, has disappeared from the table. *Pa boek*

was an extremely large fish which could once be found in the Mekong river and was highly prized. Through over-fishing and other changes to the Mekong river, it is now virtually extinct. Such ecological depredations have led to changes in Thai cuisine as well which once would have been much closer to the Lao. One reads with fascination old travellers tales of central Thailand where rhinoceros and tigers were a major hazard, along with stories of exotic birds and other wild life.

These have now disappeared and therefore disappeared from Thai tables.Unfortunately, something similar will probably happen in Laos too as it moves from the "civilised" raw to the "civilised" cooked. Most Lao food, it is fair to say, is poor peasant food. But what there is of haute cuisine can be found in one restaurant, and the recipes of the *Phia sing*, the old Master of ceremonies and Chef at the Lao court of Luang Prabang, have been published in English and in Lao as Traditional Recipes of Laos (Prospect Books, 1981). ■

LEGEND

RESTAURANTS
1 L'Opéra
2 Nampiou
3 Le Sofitya
4 Le Saloon
5 Meats and Dreams Delicatessen
6 Le Santal
7 The Taj
8 Arawan
9 Le Vendôme
10 Chez Ha Wai
11 Santhisouk
12 Hong Kong Restaurant
13 Sakura
14 Kualao
15 Shanghai
16 Mixai
17 Ban Haysok

HOTELS
1 Lane Xang
2 Le Belvédère
3 Taipan
4 New Apollo
5 Le Parasol Blanc
6 Lani Guest House 1
7 Lani Guest House 2
8 River View
9 Asian Pavilion
10 Ekalat Metropole
11 Saysana
12 Settha Guest House
13 Inter
14 Samsenthai
15 Anou

BANKS
1 Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCEL)
2 Joint Development Bank
3 Vientiane Commercial Bank
4 Setthathirath Bank
5 Bangkok Bank
6 Siam Commercial Bank
7 Bank of Ayudhya
8 Thai Farmers Bank
9 Thai Military Bank
10 Krung Thai Bank
11 Nakhornluang Bank

AIRLINES
1 Lao Aviation International
2 Thai International

GOVERNMENT OFFICES
1 Presidential Palace
2 Tax Department / Customs Department
3 Foreign Investment Managing Committee (FIMC)
4 Immigration Department
5 National Geographic Department
6 National Library
7 Post Office
8 Telecom
9 Police Headquarters
10 Ministry of Information and Culture
11 Ministry of Interior
12 Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare

BUSINESSES
1 Assurances Générales du Laos (AGL)
2 Lao International / Lao Deco
3 Skanska International Civil Engineering
4 Burapha
5 Lao Intertrade
6 Donovan Flipse Dirksen (lawyers)
7 New Chip Xeng (Honda)
8 DHL International
9 Shell Oil
10 Lao Survey & Exploration
11 Telstra OTC Australia
12 Agence de Services, Informatique et Consultation (ASIC)
13 Mernesco
14 GYNKO
15 VICO Group (consultants)
16 Ericsson Project Office

GROCERY STORES
1 Arawan
2 Phimphone Minimart
3 Laophanit
4 Srimuang Minimart

TOURISM
1 Diethelm Travel (Laos)
2 Inter-Lao Tourisme
3 On Time
4 Lanexang Travel and Tour
5 Thatluang Tour
6 Lao Travel Service
7 Raja Tour
8 SODETOUR

WATS
1 Wat Chan
2 Wat Ongtu
3 Wat Mixai
4 Wat Sisaket
5 Wat Srimuang
6 Wat Phrakao

COMPUTER STORES
1 Microtec
2 Mekhong Applied Computer Systems (MACS)
3 Vienglao Office Automation
4 Prime
5 ACE

EMBASSIES
1 France
2 United States

LEGEND

RESTAURANT
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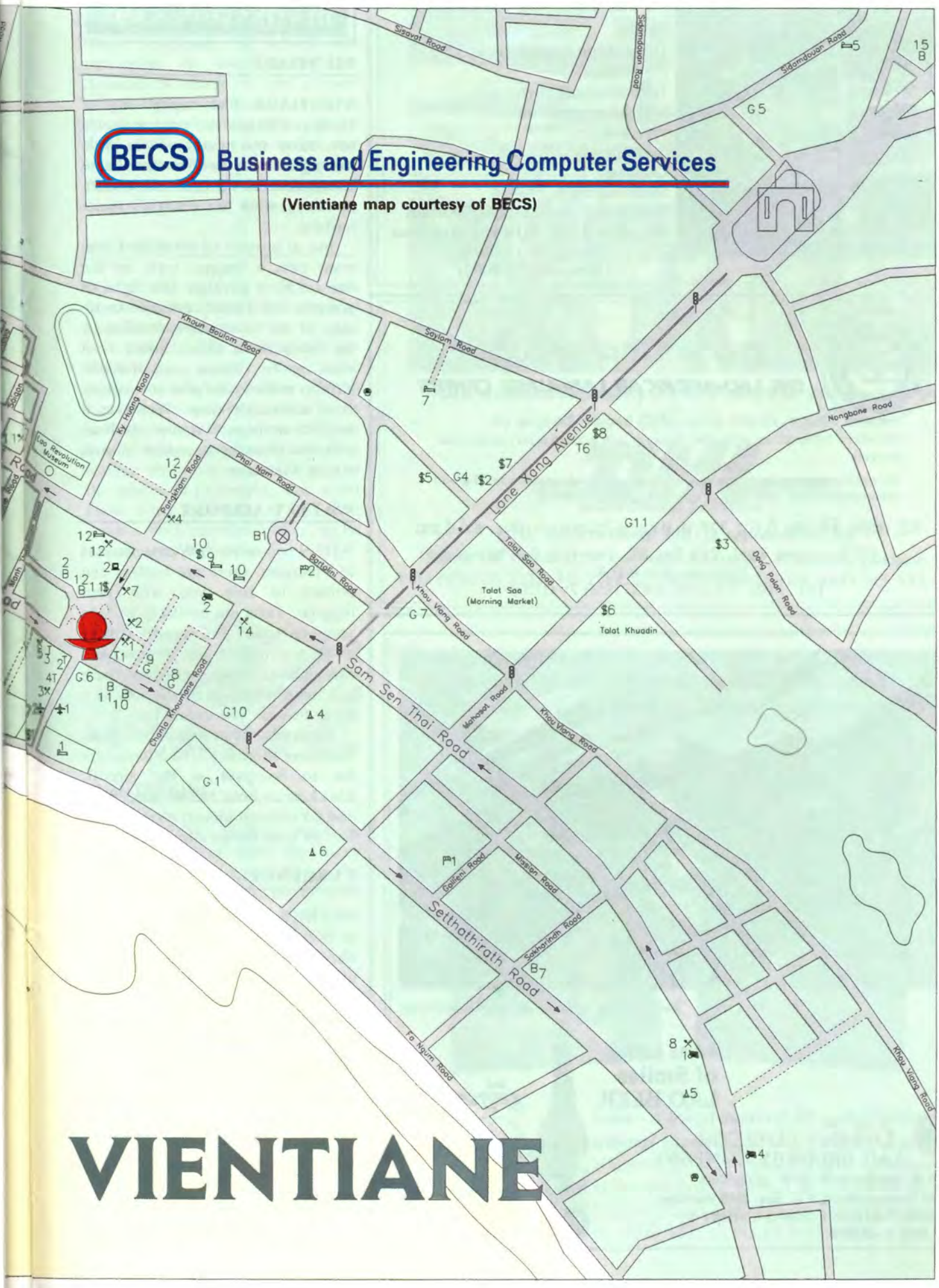
GROCERY STORE
$ BANK
T TOURISM
AIRLINE
WAT
G GOVERNMENT OFFICE
COMPUTER STORE
EMBASSY


BECS
Business and Engineering Computer Services
(Vientiane map courtesy of BECS)
Sisavat Road
Sidamdouan Road
Khoun Boulom Road
Saylom Road
Ky Huang Road
Lao Revolution Museum
Phangkham Road
Phai Nam Road
Lane Xang Avenue
Nongbone Road
Talat Sao Road
Talat Sao (Morning Market)
Talat Khuadin
Bartolini Road
Khou Vieng Road
Dong Palan Road
Sam Sen Thai Road
Mahosot Road
Chanta Khoumane Road
Gallieni Road
Mission Road
Setthathirath Road
Sakharindh Road
Fa Ngum Road
VIENTIANE

DESTINATION: LAOS

VIENTIANE

VIENTIANE, the capital city of Laos, just before the rainy season is hot, dusty and humid – cars jostle for "right of way" with an assortment of bicycles, tuk-tuks and motorbikes, not to mention the straggling water buffalo.

But as in most of the tropics, this town puts a unique spell on the visitor. Is it perhaps the sight of gracious old French colonial buildings, or the croissants and coffee by the sidewalk in China Street – it must be the cheeky grins that the girls on motorcycles give you as they skim alarmingly close. Whatever it may be, we hope that you take back with you pleasant memories of your stay in Vientiane.

WATTAY AIRPORT

WHEN you arrive at Wattay Airport in Vientiane, there are trolleys and porters to help you with your luggage. Taxis are available to take you into town. The airport is only about ten minutes out of town and although taxis have no meters, there is a price list up at the airport as a guide to what you should pay.

Remember that when you leave Vientiane there is a US$ 5 departure tax to be paid at the airport. Check in an hour before your flight and go through immigration at least half an hour before departure.

CURRENCY

THERE is a money exchange facility at the airport, and several licensed bureaus in town. A few businesses and restaurants will accept travellers' cheques. Major banks in town will also cash travellers' cheques. It is best to always use cash – that way you also get the best bargains! Credit cards, especially VISA and AMERICAN EXPRESS are slowly making an appearance in Laos.

EATING OUT

VIENTIANE offers the adventurous and the most conservative palette an interesting variety of foods from

Vietnamese noodles in soup to melt-in-the-mouth filet steak. The recent appearance of several new restaurants in town makes the decision of where to eat a most enjoyable dilemma. It is safe to eat at the larger restaurants although be wary of uncooked meat or fish and salad vegetables at roadside stalls. Bottled drinking water is in ample supply in shops and stalls.

SHOPPING

SHOPPING is a treat with reasonable prices and a wide range of handicrafts and souvenirs to take back with you. The Morning Market, Vientiane's premier department store, is a delightful bazaar offering everything from intricate silver goods to baby clothes. Laos is known for its beautiful silver goods and fascinating textiles which are so much a part of the culture of its people. You never know what treasures a tiny shop down a back street will offer, so be adventurous and explore!

SIGHTSEEING

SIGHTSEEING around town is thought-provoking with the many temples and monuments steeped in age-old history. Pay a visit to some temples and enjoy the peace and tranquillity that they offer. Climb up to the top of the Anousavari and get a bird's eye-view of the city. Stroll through the city streets at night and enjoy the heady smells, sights and sounds of balmy tropical magic.

– Billie Hay

FESTIVALS

FESTIVALS is Laos are mostly linked to agricultural seasons or historical Buddhist holidays. The general word for festival in Laos is *bun* (or *boun*).

APRIL

Pii Mai. The lunar new year begins in mid-April and practically the entire country comes to a halt and celebrates. Houses are cleaned, people put on new clothes and Buddha images are washed with lustral water. In the wats, offerings of fruits and flowers are made at various altars and votive mounds of sand or stone are fashioned in the courtyards. Later, the citizens take to the streets and dowse one another with water, which is an appropriate activity as April is usually the hottest month of the year. This festival is particularly picturesque in Luang Prabang, where it includes elephant processions. The 14th, 15th and 16th of April are official public holidays (this year).

MAY

International Labour Day (1st). This honours workers all over the world. In Vientiane there are parades, but elsewhere not much happens. It is a public holiday.

Visakha Bu-saa (Visakha Puja, Full Moon). This falls on the 15th day if the 6th lunar month, which is considered the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred around the wat, with much chanting, sermonising and, at night, beautiful candlelit processions.

Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival). This is a Buddhist rain ceremony that is now celebrated alongside Visakha Puja in Laos and north-eastern Thailand. This can be one of the wildest festivals in the country, with plenty of music and dance (especially the irreverant maw lam performances), processions and general merrymaking, culminating in the firing of bamboo rockets into the sky. In some places male participants blacken their bodies with lamp soot, while women wear sunglasses and carry wooden phalli to imitate men. The firing of the rockets is supposed to prompt the heavens to initiate the rainy season and bring much-needed water to the rice fields.

(There are no festivals in June.)

–Reprinted with kind permission from Lonely Planet Publications. "Laos – a travel survival kit" is available at the Raintree Bookstore, Vientiane.

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INDIA: WEEK BY WEEK

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