

You Should Make It

My legs started to cramp up and my backside was sore. I was sitting on a wooden plank used as a seat with another plank a foot in front of me so I could not stretch out. I had spent fourteen hours on a boat, after I had sat fourteen hours the previous day on a boat that was navigating the Mekong River. I saw a speed boat whiz by and for a moment I wish I was on that boat because that trip from Louang Phabang, Laos to the Thai border takes only six hours and not two days. However, remembering that speed boats fatally crash on average once a week due to the rocky outcrops in the Mekong, my leg cramps become more tolerable.

About halfway through the trip, a small child falls from his mother's lap on to the floor of the ship. It was quite a tumble, one that would make most children and some



adults cry. However, this child did not cry. As I thought back about the ten days I had spent in Laos, I didn't remember any children crying or an adult complaining. Even when the boat engine stopped and the crew had to start the engine by pulling a rope across it, the people did not complain. Laos was a laid-back place with laid back people being enforced by laid back rules. There are only about 50 laws in Laos, one being that you

need to wear crash helmet on speed boats.

One of the few worries in Laos is transportation, whether it be across water, land or air. In addition to speed boat crashes, land travel can be worrisome. On the trip between Vientiane and Vang Viang, the bus driver stopped on a winding road and took great pride in showing the remains of a burnt-out car that had fallen off the road into a deep gorge. Many roads get washed out and transportation can be difficult. Lao's national airline, Lao Aviation, slogan is something like "you should make it". Although the idea is that you deserve to take a flight, many interpret the slogan as you have a slightly better than average chance of safely landing. When I received my ticket, the ticket number was "823-DIE". Many government officials and military personal charter flights and do not use Lao Aviation.

Another concern in Laos was land mines and unexploded ordinance. In the US – Viet Nam war, neutral Laos became the most heavily bombed country per capita in the history of war. A standing military requirement is that a plane can not return to base with a full payload. So, when American planes launched from Thailand encountered enemy aircraft in North Vietnam and could not drop their bombs over Viet Nam, they had to drop them somewhere, Laos. Also, bombs were dropped in Laos to stop the Ho Chi Minh trail. Over two million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos, which equates to one

planeload of bombs every eight minutes for nine years. The Laotians still use the bombs because of the high-quality metal, and I saw several flowerpots and desk legs that were ex-bombs.

These concerns aside, the quiet capital of Vientiane is a perfect fit for this easygoing country. The avenues, most notably Lane Xang Avenue, are lined on each side by trees, part of the French legacy. The Laotian Arc de Triomphe, Patouxai, is located on this avenue and allows for souvenir shopping and nice views of the city. Another nod to the French is the Presidential Palace, which was originally used to house the French colonial governor and is now used for some ceremonies. The city lies on the Mekong and at night there are several small vendors selling a staggering amount of food especially seafood. Watching the sun set on the Mekong, is a treat that many tourists and locals take advantage of on a nightly basis.



There are numerous other attractions in and around Vientiane related to the Buddhist religion. The most spectacular is the Buddhist stupa, That Louang, which is a national symbol. The stupa is elaborate yet simple, all one color, gold, yet intricate. There are numerous paintings inside the courtyard and just outside the complex is a Buddhist monastery and other Buddhist temples. Next to the Presidential Palace is the Haw Pha Kaew, once the king's personal Buddhist temple. The oldest wat in Vientiane is the Wat Sisaket, dating to 1818. It includes several small Buddha and colorful funerary objects in the courtyard.

A reminder that Laos is a Communist country can be made by visiting the Lao Revolutionary Museum. The museum does a quality job in retracting Laotian history from ancient times to current. The Communist propaganda machine is at its best as many captions detail the “Japanese fascists” and “French imperialists”, while ignoring the negatives of Communism. The last room of the museum deteriorates into photos of rice, roads, soccer teams, and other random pictures with captions detailing how fortunate

Laotians are to have their Communist government. Despite this last room, it's still a worthwhile museum to visit.

A good stopover between the current capital of Vientiane and the old capital of



Louang Phabang is the city of Vang Viang. Many visit the caves which include Buddha statues within.

Walking through the rice paddies and the beautiful countryside, I decide to take a “tractor taxi”. These taxis are old Chinese tractors and are used in the fields. However, the steel wheels are traded in for rubber ones and are used for transport. Mine got stuck in a small river when the driver unexplainably drove through it instead of driving on the wooden bridge and the engine died out as the water got into it. The driver dropped his pants jumped into the river and got the engine started again and we continued to the caves.

The walk up to the caves is a slippery as I saw a lot of blood from people falling. The caves include a bronze reclining Buddha and tunnels to explore.

The city of Vang Viang is rather small and on the surface is a dull place but is spiced up by a surprisingly high amount of drugs. The aptly named Let's Get Drunk Bar and Restaurant sells a bucket of booze for three dollars, but if you vomit due to excessive drinking the price is reduced to two dollars. Poppy seeds are rampant as is opium and “happy” establishments, which can be easily be identified by their low tables and wide screen televisions, usually showing the series “Friends”. The happy restaurants sell happy shakes that make consumers feel happy. Sadly, some people never leave, and their lives ruined because of the cheap drugs.



Northern Laos's main city is Louang Phabang known for her colonial houses and relaxed feel. The city is a nice place to stroll and visit the numerous temples. One of the most attractive is Wat Xiang Thong, the Golden City Monastery. The most interesting part of the wat is her walls which have numerous stories depicted on her interior and exterior. One area shows Buddhist hell which includes sinners being boiled alive, while others escape from attacking large dogs by climbing a tree only to get their eyes pecked out by aggressive crows.

A trek up Phou Si, holy hill, will reveal numerous other exhibits. This area is the spiritual center of the city. There are several other wats and Buddha's footprint as well. From the top of the hill facing the Mekong, one can see the Royal Palace which contains an impressive Throne Hall and the most sacred Buddha image in Laos.



The long boat trip north, up the Mekong from Louang Phabang, leads to the Thai border and beyond. Chiang Rai, Thailand has an interesting night bazaar where friend insects such as silkworms, mole crickets and king crabs can be sampled. Also interesting if the Hilltribe Museum which details how the various tribes live and gives an interesting look at the history of opium.

Further north, through the area called the Golden Triangle, is Myanmar (Burma). I was given a one-day visa

and wasn't allowed more than five kilometers inside the country, as the military dictatorship keeps a tight reign on visitors. The border town of Thakhilek, is most popular for its market in which imitation Rolexes and sunglasses can be purchased. Not many stray from the market, but if you do you can see the Shwedagon Pagoda, numerous signs saying that you shouldn't have passengers on your moped, eat cow intestine and watch Buddhist monks scampering about.



You should make it to Laos. After years of turmoil, there is a sense of calmness and simplicity in Laos. You will be meet by many smiling Buddhas and many smiling people. The absence of laws, allows for a lot of personal freedom.