



Laos with children

Description

Night train from Laos-Thailand border to Bangkok.

Man, if you've already got a seat near the power socket it's a good sign to sit down and write a new post to the blog.

We came back back to Thailand two days ago. Few weeks in Laos were not enough to remind us about this strange thing stretched along all those people's faces here in Thailand almost all the time. Ah, yes. I remember. They use to call it a SMILE.

Only when we came to Thailand and the Thai smiles and friendliness shed their precious light upon us, only then could we feel how sour the Vietnamese were. Tough. Grouchy. Not everybody. Not always. But there is no way to avoid accepting that we simply got used to the smile-less faces around us most of the time, especially in the northern part of the country. And now getting used to smiling and be smiled at in return, how fast and how pleasant it is.

The border crossing from Laos to Thailand was swift and easy. No need for a visa. In an air conditioned bus that took off almost on time from Vientiane, the capital city of Laos not far from the border with Thailand. Small pleasures. Within less than two hours and a half we were already past a short tuk tuk ride from the bus station to the guesthouse who appeared to be a very good one.

Now back to the border crossing from Vietnam to Laos.

We arrived by a sleeper night bus from Sapa. I, as usual, haven't slept a minute and at 3am the bus stopped in front of a locked gate that quickly turned to be the gate of the border town bus terminal. The guesthouse owners who sold us the tickets in Sapa had no problem lying to us saying that this bus arrives in the morning (and not in the middle of the night) right on time to catch another bus to Laos if we want to do this trip in a row. Luckily we decided to do this border crossing with no rush.

We booked a hotel room in Dien Bien Phu, a town next to the Vietnam-Laos border, and at about 6am we already knocked on the hotel's doors, got into our beds and fell asleep.

The next day we crossed to Laos, for the first time in our trip without any advanced booking of accommodations in our destination – the village Muong Khuaw.

And it's not that we didn't try to find something in advance. We did the regular search in Agoda, booking.com, AllThe Rooms and their buddies. It's just that we couldn't find anything. So we landed there at around 2pm in a remote village and skipped to the next method known as – leave the wife and kids somewhere to drink coke and start searching around. It worked perfect.

We were drinking coke and The One looked around, here and there and then returned with a hesitating

smile. I like that smile. It's an I found something but not sure you'll go with the flow or honor me with a club to my left temple smile. And why do I like that smile? Because it gives me the opportunity to give him a good surprise and surprising your One after twenty years is always joyful. We went for a walk around the village. The roads are dusty. We are in the middle of the dry season. Did I say dry? I meant indescribably deadly hot and dry. Hens with chicks on every step. Curious smiley children, mud and wooden huts, lazy Lao atmosphere, babies in carriers and of course a karaoke bar quite busy for these afternoon hours.

In Laos in general not only the afternoon hours are lazy, but this whole country is rather lazy. Unlike Vietnam where you enter a shop (did I say shop? I was more referring to a place with dusty things, the majority of them of an unrecognized nature) nobody jumps on you the moment you set a foot inside to offer, ask or serve something. The more common local position is I'm lying here in my hammock enjoying my time. If there's anything you want please speak quietly. It is quite pleasant. Sellers don't nag you in the street, nobody offers you tuk tuk / packaged tour / fan / nail clipper or original Ray-Ban sunglasses.

The Laos mostly mind their own business and their business as already told is with the hammock. Actually we should have stayed longer in that cute little village. The guesthouse was really nice. It was a room in the house of a smiling old Lao couple who don't speak a word in English but it is very clear that they are full of good intentions. Even the wi fi was not bad at all. We even watched a movie in the computer. But at night the toilet flusher broke down (not our fault) and we decided to run away before we find ourselves overhauling their entire guesthouse.

We caught a boat to Nong Khiaw.

Six hours of spectacular heart opening ride along the river.

The sitting was not very comfortable and the music played by the boat driver non-stop was, let's be honest, a serious health hazard and soon enough we realized that this thing that the drivers sips from once in a while is, well, not water.

It was his own hand-made alcoholic drink, clear and not innocent at all. It's name in Lao is surprisingly Lao Lao. It contains some weird looking chips and some kinds of roots that during the rest of the ride the driver bothered himself to add more of them to the bottle.

He nicely offered a shot to The One and I am happy to say that I am not yet a widow.



Our boat from Muong Khua to Nong Khiau



Sights from along the waterway

Nong Khiau was also fun. Retroactively speaking, if we have known that down the road (we crossed Laos from north to south) we were going to have at least one lousy and unnecessary stop we would have stayed more in the north, in those sweet villages by the river. But we haven't and we had a flight to catch in Bangkok within few days so we have done Laos not as laid back as we are used to or would like to.

Next stop " Luang Prahbang.

We planned to get there and look around for a few days.

But we found a nice guesthouse and just as we planned to move on we met Noga and Alon, a young backpacking couple whom we've already met few weeks earlier in Hue, Vietnam. They told us they were organizing a Seder (the first night of the Passover Jewish holiday) and that they already found a place in one of the guesthouses and that they have a kitchen and many people are coming. So we stayed more. We eventually spent ten days in Luang Prahbang including an unforgettable Seder.

Yours truly was responsible of one of the two kitchens while The One conducted over logistics and

shopping. The Natives worked in the kitchen and mingled around with all the young backpackers that were the majority of the diners population. They were the happiest kids on earth.



Seder in Luang Prabang

The next day we took off to Vang Vieng.

For the first time in our journey we didn't buy any tickets in advance and had no idea how much time the ride takes. We just approached the local bus station and looked for tickets.

There were no available seats on the bus.

I told The One that we will wait there relaxed while he is looking for minivans. Worst case we will stay here for one more night. No big deal.

Five minutes later he returned with tickets to a minivan that left even earlier than the bus and rode fast in really good roads (I don't know why they made a fuss over the bad roads of Laos. We crossed Laos from north to south and the roads were not bad at all). Now, when I say "fast" I mean about 75 kmph in many parts of the road. Respect.

In less than four hours we arrived in Vang Vieng and that's about the last good thing I can say about this place.

The river is low. The weather is boiling hot. The music is intolerable. The population varies between drug makers, drunks and other bums recovering from their hangover. In all the restaurants, god help me understand why, they all watch infinite loops of "Friends" and "Family Guy". A whole

town full of people with glazed eyes.

It took us thirty minutes to agree that we need to leave quickly. And “quickly” in our terms means two nights later. It took us one night to get ourselves together and eat a schnitzel at Victor’s and then another day to make the necessary arrangements for the trip to Vientiane, the capital city. Vientiane is quite pleasant and finally we had there a room of our own, separated from The Natives. So now we’ve got this one going for us and it’s nice, but without doubt if we’re ever coming back to Laos it would be to the villages of the north. The laid back atmosphere, the nice people, the wonderful views, ahhh pleasure.

Muong Khua

Our first stop in Laos not far from the northern border with Vietnam. It’s a non touristic town but with enough guesthouses along the river to find a place for a night. Their major but not best part is just by the river Nam banks that winds southwards until it meets with the major channel of the Mekong river in Luang Prahbang. We reached the town by a bus from Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam (5\$ per person) that took us through the border in Laos. During the crossing we also received a one month visa (47\$ per person if taking into account the visa fee itself, payment to the doctor and bribe to the officers). In Muong Khua we stayed in an anonymous guesthouse next to the village square for 17\$ for an air conditioned family room.

Nong Khiau

The quickest and nicest (but not cheapest) way to travel to Nong Khiau is by boat. We bought tickets at the pier in Muong Khua (16\$ per person) and took off for 5 hours cruise through a wild and beautiful nature with fishing villages, stilt houses, rain forest, buffalo herds and gold seekers. After a few hours we reached another nice village of Muong Ngoi which we skipped.

Nong Khiau is divided in two by a river and the majority of the guesthouses is located on the other side of the river (in reference to the boat’s landing point). In Nong Khiau we did the most traditional Lao activity “nothing”.



Nam Ou “ view from the boat



The amazing view from the bridge in Nong Khai

Luang Prahbng

From the “central terminal” of Nong Khai we hopped on a local bus to Luang Prahbng for a bumpy ride with twenty more people on a vehicle with room for hardly ten (5\$ per person). On the board in the terminal there are four bus listed to depart during the day. In fact buses depart by occupancy. We were lucky and we got right in time to the (probably) only bus during that day. In Luang Prahbng we were dropped off in the northern bus station, a tuk tuk ride distance from the city center.

Luang Prahbng was the capital city before the title passed on to Vientiane. It reminded us of Hoi An, Vietnam, but in its unique way. Likewise it is a city with old conserved buildings and traditions that are hundreds of years old. We stayed in the city for 10 days and we didn’t feel the time passing by (Thony Guesthouse 21\$ per night for a family room).

Most of the time in Luang Prahbng we simply walked around the lovely serene streets between the dozens of Buddhist temples scattered all over the place.

For the children we booked a nice (and a bit expensive “ 21\$ per kid) traditional crossbow making workshop. The workshop was conducted by an 80 years old local veteran who was an expert in making this hunting weapon and a translator. The kids loved it and finished in a short improvised range.

We had a day trip to **Kuang Si waterfalls** 45 minutes tuk tuk ride away from the city (16\$). The falls are amazing and the pools are clean and good for swimming. In the place there is also an Asian moon bear sanctuary, a local species at risk due illegal hunting. Later we discovered that we also missed an Asian elephants sanctuary that was on the way and was worth a visit. Another nice (yet very touristic) thing to do in Luang Prahbng is the daily alms collection by the Buddhist monks. In the street corners awaiting them are the city's women with food donations which are usually white rice. The alms collection is an old tradition and is considered to carry with it good fortune. The monks collect only the food required for one day. The excess is being given away to the poor and the needy. Pure simplicity. It should be mentioned that this ceremony is not unique to Luang Prabang and actually exists in every Buddhist place. For some unknown reason it became a tourists attraction in Luang Prahbng. We also met this nice tradition when we have been to Nong Khiau but in a much smaller scale.



The "bus" that took us from Nong Khai to Luang Prabang



Kuang Si falls



Kuang Si falls



Crossbow making workshop



Alms giving ceremony in Luang Prabang

Vang Vieng

There's not much to say about this place. We have received both positive and negative reviews of it. We thought it was a waste of time to be there. Actually the fact that this party town is located in Laos is purely coincidental and it has nothing to do with the charming and peaceful country that contains it.

Nong Khai

A Thai border town very near to the border with Laos that unlike a typical border town was revealed to us as a really nice gem. Nong Khai is located by the banks of the Mekong river which is the natural and national border with Laos. This place got its fame as a popular destination of European and American pensioners who want to retire in Thailand. It's cheap and it's close to the border (for visa renewals).

In Nong Khai we had a trip to **Keou Ku park**, only a few kilometers out of town (5\$ by tuk tuk, 0.5\$ entrance fee per person). The park was designed by a Lao artist who found a refuge in Thailand after escaping the communist regime. It is full with dozens of stone sculptures.

Another place of interest is **Wat Po Chai** where you can find a golden Buddha statue with an interesting story that also painted in fresco on the temple's walls. The statue was looted during a war that took place several centuries ago between Siam and Laos. The Thais won and took it as a reward from Vientiane three golden statues that were given by the Lao king to his three daughters. The first statue reached Bangkok and can be found there to this day. The second statue drowned in the Mekong River during the efforts to transport it to Thailand and it is still there to this day. The third statue was also meant to be transported to Thailand but all kinds of logistic obstacles prevented it over and over again. The superstitious Thais concluded that there is some mystical bond between the statue and its sister in the Mekong water and decided to leave it in Nong Khai, and indeed it can be found there to this day. We reached Nong Khai by bus from Vientiane (2\$ per person) that also helped us with the soft and easy border crossing. We stayed in the excellent hotel Huan Lai (20\$ per night for two double rooms). From Nong Khai to Bangkok we took a night train (90\$ for us all).



Tuktuk shop in Nong Khai (and we always thought they were somehow improvised by the local mechanic)



Keou Ku park, Nong Khai



Category

1. Laos

Tags

1. family trip in South East Asia
2. laos with children

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