

In search of tranquillity on the trail of Ho Chi Minh.

Laos - Wednesday 23rd May to Wednesday 6th June 2001:

The legendary Ho Chi Minh trail, of South East Asia, appears to be as significant today as it was 4 decades ago - albeit for completely different reasons. Back then, in the sixties and seventies, the countries of Laos and Cambodia were embroiled in the knock on affects brought about by the infamous Vietnam War. Today, with little invasion of any kind, Laos and Cambodia are desperate for an injection of tourism, and the ultimate cash that comes with it. Could it be, however that backpackers are now setting the scene for the next tourist hot spot of South East Asia as the Ho Chi Minh trail raises increasing interest to this type of explorer.

Two weeks travelling the length of Vietnam, from south to north, had taken its toll on me, both mentally and physically. After 5 months travelling I had finally become weary of anything, and everything to do with backpacking and especially Vietnam. I had to find another country in which to recharge my batteries and having met so many fellow travellers that waxed lyrical about the place, Laos sounded like just the place to be.

And so it was that on Wednesday the 23rd May 2001 I left Vietnam and flew to Vientiane, the capital of Laos and only point of entry for international flights. The next 15 days would either restore my enthusiasm in travel or result in an earlier than expected return to the UK.

On arriving at Wattay airport (the name given to Vientiane airport) I made my way through customs, through the small but modern arrivals lounge and out to a small and dilapidated row of taxis. I then spent an agonising ten minutes negotiating a taxi fare with all the dexterity associated with someone new to a country that is unable to speak the language and who has no idea whatsoever of local taxi fares. Eventually agreed a price, with the help of my trusty guidebook and my well-used calculator, and attempted to get into the taxi. Unfortunately none of the passenger doors would open - even when the driver tried to force them with the aid of a hammer! I eventually resorted to climbing through one of the back seat windows after the driver had very kindly wound the window down and pointed out this alternative yet useful point of entry. Set off, at a steady pace, towards the centre of Vientiane, in search of some accommodation. The first guesthouse we stopped at, although highly recommended, proved to be somewhat of a let down. On entering the establishment I was presented with a reception area that's floor was nothing more than bare earth. The situation didn't improve when I inspected the rooms - paper hanging off the wall, filthy floor and what looked like pubic hair in the bed. I had found out, by this stage in my travels, that you can generally judge the cleanliness of a place by giving the bathroom a once over and this one, coupled with the state of the bedroom, certainly failed the litmus test. On the spot

decision – move on. Got back into the taxi (via the window) and set off in search of another guesthouse but this time with the rudimentary basics normally associated with a half decent establishment.

The following day I flew to Phonsavan in the province of Xieng Khuang - northeast Laos. As I flew over the province I couldn't help but notice that much of the area was splattered with bomb craters in which little if any vegetation appeared to be growing. It was here, in Phonsavan, that I met up with Joe Cummings (author of the Lonely Planet guides for; Thailand, Laos and Myanmar (Burma)).

There was a lot of excitement at the guesthouse the morning he arrived and it was obvious that the owners, who had played host to Joe on a previous occasion, were thrilled at the return of such a distinguished guest. It wasn't so much a case of rolling out the red carpet but it was obvious that they wanted to impress him. A few good words written in the 'Laos Lonely Planet update' would no doubt do wonders for their business.

It transpired that Soutsath, the guesthouse owner, was going to take Joe on a guided tour of some of the lesser-known historical sites around Phonsavan. Never one to miss an opportunity I asked if I could tag along.

Joe was a very interesting character with a real passion for the countries that he writes so enthusiastically about. For someone who is so well known I felt that he was a rather reserved individual who shied away from spouting off about himself, unlike most other celebrities I had met in the past. We got on well and took the opportunity to swap a large number of traveller based tales.

The first place we visited, as part of Soutsath's guided tour, was a section of the Ho Chi Minh trail where bits of American war hardware were still evident. This included, amongst other things, the remains of an old tank, which Soutsath had purchased (in situ) for the benefit of his tour - preventing it from being hauled away and used as scrap, which is what evidently happened to most of the other debris left over from the Vietnam War. The people of the area had been very resourceful in their eagerness to use up any hardware left over, and have even used bomb casings as fence posts. We also visited a few sights where UXO (unexploded ordnance) was still visible. This consisted of a walk through a wood still littered with craters and unexploded cluster bombs. Fortunately Soutsath had marked out a path - which we religiously stuck to.

Our final stop was a cave where 200 Buddha images had been found – the cave having previously been used as a religious site. It was also used during the Vietnam War as an army hospital and still housed one of the now rusting hospital beds. The site had just been opened up to visitors with the princess of Thailand having been there only the previous day. The red ribbons that had been put up in her honour were still in place making us feel all the more privileged.

Some of the roads that we travelled on during our site seeing trip had just been opened up to travel by foreign visitors, prior to this it they had been 'no go areas' because of previously fatal ambushes. At one point the Russian jeep that we were travelling in became stuck, as we negotiated a particularly bad piece of road, this resulted in us having to get out of the vehicle to push. Whether for effect I don't know, but Sousath menacingly flashed his loaded handgun at the two suspicious characters that appeared from nowhere ready to close in on us at the drop of a hat. I have to say that I was extremely relieved when we all got back into the jeep and were able to speed off, unscathed, leaving the unwelcome onlookers far behind.

The area around Phonsavan suffered a heavy bombing campaign during the period of the 'secret war', between 1964 and 1973. In fact the country of Laos holds the record for being the most bombed country in the world. During the Vietnam conflict the USA dropped 2 million metric tonnes of bombs on the country in an attempt to destroy the Ho Chih Minh trail, which ran through Laos and Cambodia from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. This bombing equated to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, around the clock, for 9 years. In fact The USA dropped more bombs on Laos than they did during the whole of WW2. Both the USA and Vietnam contravened the 1962 Geneva Accord that recognised Laos as a neutral country during the Vietnam War. The Accord also forbade any foreign military presence in Laos. The subsequent nine-year battle that took place was kept so secret that the country was never mentioned by name but known only as 'the other theatre'. An estimated 30% of the bombs that were dropped on Laos did not explode. To this day children and livestock are still being maimed or killed when they inadvertently detonate one or more of these invisible bombs. Most of the UXO are cluster bombs or 'bombies', as the locals call them, which landed in mud and failed to detonate. Thankfully experts such as MAG (Mines Advisory Group) are slowly clearing areas of UXO, but it is a long slow process, likely to take many, many years to complete.

One area of controversy still causing concern for a lot of Americans is that of soldiers missing in action – MIA's. It is thought that a number of American soldiers, who fought in the Vietnam War, are still alive today and perhaps married to Laos or Vietnamese women. Uncertain of their reception back home they are thought to have made the decision to stay in Laos. Sousath has been approached, on more than one occasion, to organise search parties for a number of specific soldiers – as of yet none of these soldiers have been found.

Before leaving Phonsavan I had a whistle stop tour of the plain of jars – an area of rolling countryside where huge jars of unknown origin lie scattered around in bewildering disarray. Two theories have been put forward as to the reason for their existence. One suggestion is that they were used as sarcophagi the other that they were used as fermentation jars for wine. Whatever the reason it was an impressive site to visit with several hundred jars to see, each one carved out of

solid stone. The average weight of these jars was between 500 kilograms and 1 tonne, with the biggest one weighing in at around 6 tonnes - visually this would compare to a mini motorcar placed vertically on its boot.

From Phonsavan I flew to Northeast to Luang Prabang. The flight was amazing with some incredible views from the twenty-seater aircraft operated by that well-known commercial airline – ‘Laos Aviation’. The sky was virtually cloud free, for the whole journey, which allowed me to see some beautiful scenery. Hills and valleys carpeted with trees like tightly packed clusters of broccoli. A few rice terraces were visible, each one hugging the side of the valley walls where just enough water could be held to allow the production of one of South East Asia’s most important crops. From my Arial viewpoint I could also see the rivers that were running brown with mud and the wisps of cloud that dispersed themselves across the picturesque mountains that lay below us.

With only 4 million people on a landmass of 235,000 sq. km (roughly equal in size to Great Britain) there are vast areas of Laos still unexplored by man. Many minority tribes still frequent the northern areas of this country particularly the Hmong people. Some of their villages were just visible next to small tracts of deforested land that had yielded forth one of the country’s major exports, namely timber. As we got nearer to Luang Prabang I could see that much larger areas of deforestation had taken place. Valley walls once green with trees had now been left completely brown from the soil that had been ultimately exposed.

Landed safely in Luang Prabang having successfully block out all the stories I had heard about air travel in Laos. Allegedly Laos Aviation’s safety records are not made public. Pilots normally have to rely on visual flying techniques and in heavy cloud it is particularly common for them to circle round until they can find a hole in the clouds through which to descend. Stories of planes crashing into the sides of mountains are also common. The moral of this story being - don’t jump on a plane in Laos unless the sky is completely void of clouds.

Now an UNESCO world heritage site, Luang Prabang was a relaxing place in which to chill out for a couple of days, mainly due to its very sleepy nature. From Luang Prabang I ventured south to Vang Vieng, on an unforgettable 6-hour bus ride that will remain permanently etched in my mind for the rest of my life. For the whole of the journey my fellow passengers and I were thrown from one side of our seats to the other as the driver forced the ancient and creaking bus to hug every hairpin bend we came across. I must have picked one of the worse seats possible. The young Laos guy in front of me spent most of the journey wrenching up bile from the depths of his stomach and then propelling it out of the half open window. At one point he managed to produce, what looked like, a whole mugful of the vile concoction, which he ultimately showered me with in his failed attempt to project it through the window. He apologised (I think) by giving me a timid smile whilst at the same time pointing to his somewhat bloated stomach!

The scenery that was unveiled to me during this trip was particularly breathtaking. The hairpin bends that we careered round were made all the more stomach churning by the sheer drops that alternated either side of the narrow road, which lay before us. Plunging valleys covered with dense forest; soaring mountains with peaks completely hidden by thick cloud; village after village made up of wooden houses, all of which were built on wooden stilts. Some of these homes possessed modern tin roofs but the majority still displayed the thatched ones originally used when they were constructed. The winding road took us higher and higher to the extent that we couldn't see the valley floor for the thickness of the clouds that now lay below us. Finally we started our descent into the beautiful town of Vang Vieng where I managed to regain my composure on 'tera firma'.

From Vang Vieng I continued my journey by road back to Vientiane, for a welcome overnight stop. From Vientiane I travelled south to Savannakhet a 9-hour journey on one of the most packed busses I have ever had the misfortune to travel on. Trains on the London underground, at rush hour, are less crowded. Unaware (still) of the importance of claiming a bus seat, at the earliest possible moment, I ended up sitting on a plastic stool, which I had selected from the row that had been hastily placed along the entire length of the central aisle. The people who sat squashed each side of me (three a breast) and the other travellers who sat on similar plastic seats to myself, appeared totally unconcerned with the makeshift seating arrangements. I then spent the first few hours of the journey extensively testing various seating positions, including methods such as 'the alternating cheek' and 'the hover' before finally relinquishing all normal nerve sensations in favour of a state devoid of all feeling.

Had an overnight stop in Savannakhet town before jumping on to the 5.30am bus destined for Pakse. Met Avi an Israeli guy in his mid 30's with a seemingly healthy and active attraction to most of the girls he had been travelling with. Then there was Angela a 22-year-old Canadian girl who hardly said a word and who gave me the distinct impression that she was not enjoying this travel lark one little bit. From Savannakhet to Pakse we travelled on some of the worse roads I have ever been on – even worse than Cambodia. Highway 13 was being re-built, and whilst almost complete, many parts of it were still closed off to transport. We drove on the luxury of the completed road for short bursts before being diverted to mere dirt tracks where the bus bumped and ground its way through small farms and villages only to be diverted back onto the new road for another short distance. The dust was unbelievable - every inch of the bus was plastered with the stuff. Avi and I, keen to get a good view (and to keep cool), kept the windows open at every opportunity. It would have made little difference had we kept them closed as the bus had dust bellowing into it from all sorts of splits and tears within its rickety fabrication. Finally reached Pakse at 1.00 pm where we caught a Tuk Tuk to the ferry point before catching a boat to the small village of Champasak where we arrived two hours later – filthy, hungry, and thoroughly exhausted.

The reason for my trip to Champasak was to visit Vat Phu, a religious complex of khmer architecture and Hindu religion. Having spent the early part of the following morning walking through the beautiful village of Champasak, now a ghost of its former colonial self, Avi, Angela, and myself jumped onto our taxi to Vat Phu - a motor bike and side car.

My return journey to Vientianne was slightly more complicated than the outward journey. I knew I had to get back to Savannakhet that night as my plane to Hong Kong left the next day so time was of the essence. Sunday was not the best day to be doing this trip, as most forms of transport operated on a limited basis or not at all. My journey consisted of a departure from Chapasak at 11.00am by Tuk Tuk, which got me to the ferry crossing - a mile or so out of the village of Champasak. Then took the five-minute ferry across the deep and murky Mekong River. Then spent a considerable amount of time negotiating a lift in a private truck that would take me the half-hour trip to the infamous Highway 13, which gave me the only hope of getting back to civilisation in time to complete my journey. Within an hour of arriving at Highway 13 I managed to thumb a ride with a lorry which took me to the bus station in Paxe. I then caught the Bus to Savannakhet finally taking a Tuk Tuk to a guesthouse, arriving at 9.30pm. I briskly checked into a room before jumping back into the same Tuk Tuk in search of a restaurant where I could quench both my appetite and my raging thirst.

The people of Vietnam and Laos are as different as Chalk and Cheese. The nation's capital is peaceful and friendly, even when compared to Hanoi (Vietnam). Laos has to be one of the best countries that I have visited so far, mainly because of its laid back atmosphere and its people who are the most delightful of any country. Tourism is still very much in its infancy, but with the huge potential for expansion I only hope that the people of this charming and tranquil country will not change too much.

And so what did I decide at the end of my stay? Well Laos certainly gave me the opportunity to recharge the batteries and salvage my psychological composure. I regained all of my enthusiasm to travel and ultimately moved onto the next port of call – China.