

Languid Luang Prabang, Laos - February 26, 2011

We jumped up to Luang Prabang, World Heritage Town, in **Laos** for two days and got sucked into the serenity for 12. The languid ambience is reminiscent of *On the Road to Luang Prabang* by Jason Kipling, a distant cousin of Rudyard's (and the black sheep of the family):

And the days slipped by
Like they were coated in KY....



I don't know anyone who works harder than The Dragon Lady, heading a team in ICU, and who can relax faster once off the treadmill. This is our morning coffee and newspaper ritual on the Mekhong River.



The lazy main drag of languorous Luang Prabang. Like Nepal and Turkey, everyone falls in love with Laos. Why? It's the most somnambulant, tranquil, calm country, the people gentle and hospitable (if half asleep)—astonishing when you realize that more bombs dropped on this tiny nation during the CIA's Secret War than all of Europe in WWII. More on this later.



Shooting across the main drag towards the Mekhong.



French colonial architecture abounds.





Actually, there was another reason we didn't trek into the jungl as planned. My 86-year-old mother landed in a Cardiac Unit in Calgary and I needed to be in daily Skype and airport contact. There was a happy ending though, and she was sent home.



There's old temples everywhere and this is everyone's fave.



Hey! Hey! We're the Monkees!



This is their view to the right, the Nam Khan that flows into the Mekhong. Old Luang Prabang is on the peninsula between the two. The old town is only four streets wide.



We're ostensibly here for the enormous Night Market to continue piecing together our Hmong textile collection, but it's really an excuse. We're ethnologists, we love collecting, and doing so not only enhances our cultural experience traveling, but allows us to save the rapidly disappearing hardware of minority cultures in museums where it'll be safe and saved for posterity. Or will it? Tomorrow New York could go up in a mushroom cloud, or at most in another few years mankind is hurling off a cliff. It almost feels futile. Hope, denial and duty free Single Malt keeps me going.



Laos is one of the few countries where Stone & Bronze Age tools are for sale. Humans have been here for 40,000 years and there's thousands of limestone caves. Agriculture (the Neolithic revolution) began here in the 4th millennium. Also for sale are opium scales, weights and even used pipes. Places like the Market are where collectors hone in. We trek to villages too, staying with them, but it's more to soak up the fascinating hilltribe cultures (there's 49 here), and for the adventure. Very little is collected there. But the Night Market this trip (my third) is largely a disappointment for Hmong gear. There's very little of value, prices are atrocious, and watering down of quality for tourists is rampant. Fifteen years ago when I was first here, it was very different. Stone axe heads were \$2-3 each; now they're \$25. Su and I have put together modest Stone and Bronze Age tool collections over the years. That said, we made key textile purchases and at good prices.



Way back in the Stone Age there was a tool maker so talented that his utilitarian creation elevated to art. This is me admiring – across that vast expanse of time & progress—that man’s work in this finely ground and balanced adze he obviously took pride in (and his friends admired). A showpiece artifact.



The Bronze Age began here about 1500 BC. We added a couple of their tools to our collection. They're getting rare, though these two cost only \$70. (The Iron Age dates to 700BC marking Angkor Wat, 900-1500AD, from this period.)



A sight that brings tears to the eyes of an ethnologist. I take as much pleasure admiring the beauty and artistry of a well woven basket as I do standing before a Brueghel or Vermeer, my favorite artists, in the Louvre or MET. That said, basket weaving is going downstream too. That said, we bought a humungous hilltribe backpack but the quality was so brilliant that it was impossible to pass up. (No pic, sorry, it's being wrapped.)



After a hard (ha!) day of collecting I put my feet up and enjoy a couple of my favorite smoky ones – a Coheba cigar with an Islay Scotch. My trusty hammock is strung nearby. You can see the Mekhong across the road. I'm in Full Lao Mode.



This is the view up the Mekhong.



One day we shook ourselves free of lethargy, rented a motorbike, and went on a pilgrimage to Hank's tomb. It's 6 miles out of town overlooking the Nam Khan River. Henri is famous as the explorer who "discovered" Angkor Wat, though it was never lost. However his diaries, posthumously published as *Travels in Siam, Cambodia and Laos*, made Angkor famous in the West and subsequently the world. I feel a close affinity to Mouhot, more so than any other East Asian early explorer. Like me, he was a collector, though as a naturalist. *Travels* reveal a brilliant young man with a hungry curiosity delighting in his explorations, meetings, and collecting. It's one of the great reads in exploration literature. Unfortunately, he died of "jungle fever"—malaria—and it was an agonizing death as evidenced by his last entry: "Have pity on me, O my God."



We finally dragged ourselves out of our hammock and onto a mini-bus for the 7-hour trip to the Plain of Jars where there's hundreds of fascinating 2500-3000 year-old-jars, probably burial jars. Secondary burial in jars is common throughout Southeast Asia.



Su's standing on the lip of an enormous crater caused by a 2000-pound bomb dropped by a B-52 at Site One of the jar fields. The Plain of Jars was the major battlefield during the CIA's Secret War of 1964-73. Very simplified: the communist Pathet Lao backed by the Vietnamese Army were on one side; Lao Royalists backed by the CIA backed Hmong on the other; in what was a civil war. Who controlled the Plain controlled Laos and control flip-flopped several times. Fighting was fierce, often hand to hand.



I've tramped lots of battlefields—Marathon, Ypres, Khyber Pass, Khe Sanh, Hastings, Plains of Abraham, Hiroshima, Gettysburg, Alamo, Little Big Horn, Corregidor, Troy (if Homer is to be believed), Batoche, Duck Lake, Cut Knife Hill, Fish Creek, Ayutthaya—but this is the most beautiful, reminding me of the Napa Valley with bamboo. Motorbiking around one sees hundreds of craters (mostly filled in like the ones atop these hills), Soviet tanks (2), trenches and de-fused bombs holding up huts. Millions of UXO—unexploded ordnance—still litter the area and the nearby Ho Chi Minh Trail. They're maiming and killing Laotians decades, and for likely centuries, after ceasefire, thanks to LBJ, Nixon & Kissinger. The Three Stooges. Baseball sized “bombies” are everywhere. UXO clearance is ongoing and will be for many decades.



Note numerous craters above the jar field.

I was acquainted with the principals of the Secret War, from late CIA Director Bill Colby, through super spook Bill Lair who masterminded it, Pat Landry his second, the late General Heine Aderholt whose air tactics wreaked havoc on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, to legendary CIA paramilitary operatives like the late Tony Poe and the equally deceased Jack Shirley. The latter two in the early '60s flew in on Air America Hueys to organize, arm and lead the Hmong in Laos.

Jack and I were close friends enough to discuss doing his autobiography-as-told-to which I wanted to call *CIA Hitman*. But focusing on the dozen hits he did for the CIA, from Thailand to Paris, sometimes in support of the DEA, would have placed him in serious legal shit, and I refused to treat them fictitiously. Thus, no book. Jack was the CIA's Mr.Fix-it.



Several of those hits were done with Tony—who is *the* maverick spook in CIA annals. Tony was equally outrageous and brave, first tasting battle, and loving it, at Iwo Jima. When the US ambassador in Vientiane questioned his weekly kill reports, he stapled ears to the subsequent one, causing the ambassador's secretary to spew. Furious, he called Tony on a secure line and fired him—but Tony drunkenly told the ambassador to go fuck himself. So brave was he the Hmong would follow no one else, hamstringing the ambassador. On an earlier assignment training Tibetan Khampa warriors he was instrumental in whisking the Dalai Lama out of Tibet in 1959.



Many of those bands of adventurers—Air America and Ravens (flew forward air control)—are friends, like Air America Chief Pilot Les Strouse (not to be confused with that other adventurer, Les Stroud) who is on this email list. They're among the bravest people I know, and true adventurers all. They're woven into my first two adventure-thrillers, *Thai Gold* and the sequel *Opium Dream*. In *Opium Dream* Tony was the model for major character Bazooka; Jack for Cactus Jack.



I met most of them at Bangkok's legendary Lucy's Tiger Den, itself the model for The Lion's Den in *Thai Gold*. Now that both Tiger's and the colourful Tiger are defunct, these old warriors and adventurers hang at the Madrid bar on Patpong, the model for Cactus Jack's, the bar in *Opium Dream*. Other Old Lao Hands like the personable MacAlan Thompson, with USAID during those days, can be found there as well.



And that's how I got interested in the Hmong. Recently Hmong General Vang Pao, their enormously respected leader and as fearless a fighter as Tony, was in the news when he was refused burial at Arlington, with his multi-day Hmong funeral taking place instead in Fresno. 17,000 or 10% of the Hmong population died fighting the US proxy war, and he was all but a god to the survivors. Other exceptions to the "only Yank" rule exist so this is just another of many examples of Yank superficiality. Vang Poe and over 100,000 eventually made it to America. Clint Eastwood did an excellent job of portraying them as they have adjusted in *Gran Torino*. The best line of the movie: "The boys are all in jail and the girls are all in university."



Such is my admiration for the Hmong—their fierce independence, enormous artistic expression, excellent hospitality—that the love interest in *Opium Dream*, Maew, was surnamed Vang and was essentially General Vang Pao's daughter. To further honour them, my 30-year mission has been to save their embroidery and textiles in a museum before their brilliant artistry is swept away by globalization.

I never had the chance to meet Vang Pao but Les (Strouse) choppered him and spent at least one night sharing a hooch. This made Les a wee bit nervous, knowing that the Pathet Lao and the entire Vietnamese Army wanted to nail Vang Pao's balls to a banyan tree. Les reported that Vang Pao slept well, he laughs.



In Vientiane, I was shocked to see this, this, this thing replacing the old lazy natural riverbank with its vendor restaurants (broiled fish & salad & a quart Beer Lao=\$4.00). The sleepy capital I fell in love with years ago has—in the last two years—turned into a mini-Bangkok! Traffic is horrendous & construction sounds literally grinds!



This is the inside shot between the town and the river. Behind me it sweeps around the river bend for a kilometer. I'll just have to get used to it and I'm sure I will. For a country still flying the hammer-and-sickle, they're doing a brilliant job. These pics will only make sense to old Lao hands.



This is in the middle of it. The krauts have their Seig Heil. The Lao, their Seig Lao.
(Sorry, I couldn't help myself, he laughs.)



Anyway, let's finish with a pretty Lao girl, even if she's an ad on a fridge door found when Su and I were motorbiking around. God, I love Laos....