

Report on a journey through Laos

1. Approaching the country

Coming from the South of Thailand we took a flight to *Chiang Rai* in the North, near the border to Laos. This town is said to have an attractive night market, but we did not know that and did not find it as we found first an enticing garden restaurant and after that our bed in a guesthouse („Boonbundan“, Jedyod Road, Tel. 053/717040-1). It is central and quite near the night market and the bus station. In spite of this there is no traffic noise around the guesthouse because it lies in a backyard.

The next morning we took the bus to *Chiang Khong*, the border crossing-point on the riverside of the *Mekong*. We knew the time of departure but it was good to be at the bus station 15 minutes in advance, because the bus started when it was full – five minutes too early! It was the oldest bus of Thailand I suppose, for it sounded as if it were to break down, fortunately it didn't. Both doors remained open during the three-hour trip because it was very warm outside (35°C) – with the result that it was relatively cold inside (20° C, I guess). In cases like this – transport on pick-ups or boats – it is comfortable to have a *sarong*. The route from Chiang Rai to Chiang Khong is interesting. For the first hour we looked at large rice fields which were mostly yellow, and at the farmers who gather in the straw which they skilfully build up to little huts with round roofs. We saw many tiny villages with the typical, thatched bamboo-huts upon their stakes. The second part of the route leads through green hills and beautiful mountains. The bus station of *Chiang Khong* is positioned at the southern end of the town so that the passengers are compelled to take one of the moped taxis which are waiting here. They can take only one person (20 Baht) along to the northern end of the dusty town where some guesthouses are waiting. Most of the tourists stay there only one night because they came only for the passage to Laos. Until the end of the



year 2000 some owners of guesthouses or shops in Chiang Khong earned a little money by selling the visa which is necessary for crossing the border to *Laos*. But since January 2001 it is no longer possible to buy such a visa like a ticket. The government of Laos determined to hand over visas issued only by his embassies but no authority did publish this edict. So tourists who came to Chiang Khong and had no visa needed help – what a fortune for the shopkeepers of this town! Their business now is to take the passport and the application form of the tourists, to give it to one of the bus drivers who go to Bangkok each morning and to the Laotian embassy next morning and bring back passport and visa in the evening. After having spent two or three nights in one of the guesthouses of Chiang Khong the tourist gets his visa and is able to leave this helpful town.

We were lucky because we had made an application for a visa to the embassy of Laos in Berlin two months ago and got the visa in time before we started our journey.

We stayed in the „Bamboo Guesthouse“ directly at the riverside of the *Mekong*. The room and the bed was okay (250 Baht). The lunch was very delightful in the Guesthouse „Sopaphan“ – it is the most beautiful house in the town.

2. On the Mekong

In the morning we crossed the river by boat and passed the frontier. We changed money and got 1 million Kip for 5000 Baht (125 Euro), so we became millionaires! At the dock we saw many colorful boats. One of them started with us and about 70 other tourists at 11 a.m. The boat was very quick and so it was very windy. It was misty and cold until the afternoon and we enjoyed our jackets.

At the starting point the Mekong has a breadth of 500 m but from there the river became smaller, about 200 m I guess. In winter time the banks are broad and look like sandy beaches but consist of fertile soil. Parts of them are cultivated by farmers. We saw some farmers and cows, fishermen and boathouses, and villages in the woods high above the river. Along the banks and sometimes in the midst of the river there are many black and bright rocks. Therefore, and because of the rapids and shallows, the captain had to drive far more curves than the river has.

The Mekong is 4500 km long, the eighth greatest river of the world. Sourced 5000m up on the Tibetan Plateau it runs half its length through China (there called „Lancang Jiang“ = Turbulent River). Leaving China the Mekong serves as borderline between Laos and Myanmar and adjacently between Laos and Thailand (there called „Mae Nam Khong“ = Mother of Waters). Some miles south of Chiang Khong, our starting point, the Mekong turns to the East, leaves the border of Thailand and flows to *Luang Prabang*, the ancient capital of Laos, our first destination.

On the way we had a stop in *Pakbeng*, a large village. We slept in hard beds that were too small. Perhaps we would have slept better if we had accepted the offer to buy some opium from the boy who carried my baggage.

3. Luang Prabang

In the afternoon of the second day on the riverboat we reached *Luang Prabang*. The guesthouse where we had booked a room

was only 300 m away from the dock but we did not know this before. We took a *Tuktuk* and though we paid the driver a



fixed price he made a roundaboutway – to justify the price, I guess.

The „*Xieng Mouane Guest House*“ in *Luang Prabang* (Tel./Fax: 856-71-25-2152) is a restored colonial building near the riverside, not far from the mainstreet of the city, and has a lovely garden. Our apartment (25 \$ the night incl. tea and coffee) was equipped with bathroom, wardrobe, table, chairs and a good bed and it had its own terrace where we had breakfast. *Luang Prabang* is situated 300m above the sea level and from there the Mekong flows 500 km southwards down to *Vientiane*, the capital of Laos. *Luang Prabang* sits at the junction of the Mekong and Khan rivers. In the entire district of *Luang Prabang* there live about 63 000 people but in the municipality only 16 000. In the town cars are still scarce and monasteries plentiful. We visited almost all of the temples – called *wat*. Each of them has something specially interesting. I would like to mention the unique



glass-mosaics at the big walls of the *Wat Xieng Thong*, the



old carved figures in *Wat Visoun*, the gigantic silver snakes in front of the *Wat That*, the great paintings inside of the *Wat Paa Phon* and the panorama from the *Wat Phu Si* on the top of the hill in the center of the town.

Between the hill and the Mekong river there entice many little shops with Laotian handicrafts and textiles. Fascinating is also the centrally located *Talaat Dala* with the best overall selection of textiles at reasonable prices.



Places to eat are to be found everywhere in the town. We loved the small open-air restaurants along the Mekong river and especially the *Khem Karn Food Garden* on the west bank of the *Nam Khan*. All of

them have passable Lao food, cool beer and a good river view.

After five days we left Luang Prabang by bus. It had been impossible to get exact information about the departure time. It started at 10.10 a.m. and took more than six hours for the tour to the next town but six hours with wonderful views of the landscape. *Vang Vieng* – 160 km north of Vientiane – lies at the river *Nam Song* in the midst of limestone cliffs. The main attraction is the karst topography lining the west bank of the river. There are many caves – some of them are named and often visited by tourists, others are unexplored, all are said to be inhabited by spirits. The town itself has the charm of a cement factory surrounded by hundreds of barracks. Most of them are little guesthouses, restaurants, bars and shops for the travellers.

We stayed in the guesthouse *Thavonsouk* at the bamboo bridge, with this view:



The bridge stands only for some months, in the dry season when the river is low.

4. Vientiane

The bus from *Vang Vieng* to *Vientiane* takes 3 hours and 15 minutes. We put up at the hotel „Lani I“ (Setthathirat Road 281) in a central but quiet location near the garden of a temple (35 \$ incl. breakfast for two). The best thing in the town is the banks of the Mekong and the little pubs there. The second best thing is the *National Museum (formerly Revolutionary Museum)* which shows impressingly the history of Laos, especially the time of the American bomb terror during the war against Vietnam. Moreover, we saw many *wats*

and handicraft shops and also the famous weaving-mill *Carol Cassidy* – too famous for us to buy more than a little shawl.



The most famous temple of Vientiane is the *Wat Pha That Luang* but we made no picture of it because it is a gigantic golden steeple as an ostentatious show-off . But near by we found this wonderful old building:



This temple is carried by four Asian „Supermen“ which are a bit like their American counterpart:



At one wall of the *wat* nearby you can see a funny scuffle of some temple-guards:



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