

LAOS

Shangri-La Beneath HAMMER AND SICKLE

By Robert **ČOBAN**
President of Color Press Group



"Europeans who come to live here take on distinctive mannerisms very soon - their voices mollify and they become softer and more discreet in expressing themselves!" - Norman Lewis said in his book "A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam" which he wrote during his travels in Indochina in 1952 just before the Indochina wars. Indeed, the first thing that you notice (and hear) is the calmness and 'low volume' of voices of the Lao people, unlike the much louder and more expressive Thai and Vietnamese people. This softness of expression becomes even more pronounced when the people of Laos 'clash' with noisy nations like ours

Entering mainland Laos via the Friendship Bridge on the River Mekong is not simple or fast. You can cross the border only on foot. Aside from our five-member group, other people who are waiting in line for the visas are several former citizens of Laos with US passports (over 150,000 residents of Laos left the country, mostly for the US, following the collapse of the monarchy in 1975), two visibly drunk Russians, a nun, and a couple of Australian backpackers. The passport procedure at Hanoi Airport, a few days later, made us think that the complications we had had at the border with Laos were a piece of cake compared what we would have to endure when entering Vietnam.

THE COMMUNISTS ERECT A MONUMENT IN HONOUR OF THE KING

After we got our visa, we boarded a different bus which took us across the Friendship Bridge to Vientiane, the capital city of Lao's People Democratic Republic. The first thing you notice upon entering the town are the flags of the main po-

litical party, bearing a yellow sickle and hammer on a red background, flying right next to the national flag of Laos. Just like in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia back in the day. The second thing you notice is a huge monument of a man who is opening his hands towards the river, located on the River Mekong. It must be one of the country's Communist leaders, you would think. But, surprise, surprise, it is a giant monument erected in honour of King Chao Anouvong (built in 2010 to mark the 450th anniversary of his rule) who is holding out a hand of friendship to the neighbouring country of Thailand. It is very rare to see in the world, particularly in the Balkan area, the biggest monument in a country not holding up a sword or a clenched fist to frighten 'the enemy' but rather offering a hand of friendship to the neighbouring country which, by the way, had brutally enslaved Laos before the country was conquered by the French in the late 19th century. Also, it is quite rare to see that the Communist Party



erects a monument in honour of a monarch, regardless of the fact that he lived in a very distant past.

Souvenir stands are perched right beneath the monument and here you can buy the photographs of the Communist leaders and ideologists from Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin to Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh.

The Funky Monkey Hostel is a favourite with backpackers and it costs €4 per night per bed. It's no different than any other hostel in the world, brimming with young Europeans, Australians and Americans drinking local beer at €0.90 (or 8,000 kips) a pop, playing the guitar and singing. After a wonderful lunch at a small local restaurant on the banks of the Mekong, we board a tuk-tuk which takes us to Xieng Khuan, 25 km away, also known as Buddha Park. This is a rather bizarre looking park with Buddhist and Hindu sculptures built by priest/yogi/shaman Luang Pu Bunleua Sulilat in 1958. The park does resemble the parks in Western Europe a little bit with

the statues of communist leaders. Xieng Khuan has several dozen concrete statues of Buddha, Vishnu, Shiva, Aryuna and other deities from both religions. The tropical humidity here causes every single building - from cathedrals and temples made of brick to concrete monuments - to have a patina which makes these buildings, including the monuments in Buddha Park, look much older than they actually are. Following the 1975 political uprising, Luang Pu escaped to Thailand where he built an almost identical park called Wat Khaek in the town of Nong Khani.

WHAT CAN A TRACTOR TIRE, OPIUM AND LIME JUICE DO?

Walking around the new part of Vientiane, we expected to see the rigid Communist dictatorship with traces of Buddhist mysticism, but what we saw was a dynamic capital city with new buildings springing up left and right, and passing cars



Walking around the new part of Vientiane, we expected to see the rigid Communist dictatorship with traces of Buddhist mysticism, but what we saw was a dynamic capital city with new buildings springing up left and right, and passing cars worth much more than those in European cities

worth much more than those in European cities. Chinese capital has flooded Laos too, just like many Asian, African and Latin American countries. Like China, Laos is a single party state with a market economy. In the last few years, the country's GDP growth was in the double digits. On the other hand, the impression that our group, and some journalists who wrote

about this subject, were under was that Laos resembled a secluded island in a sea of consumerism, concrete buildings and reality shows which swept over Indochina. Unlike Vietnam, there are no police in the streets, the people seem relaxed and in good moods. Cafes close at 11 pm, and almost everybody wakes up before 6 am.

By contrast, the national TV station programme is completely out of synch with the reality that we saw. The TV programme consists of a series of video clips of revolutionary songs performed by a man and woman duet while footage of military pa-

rades, mass stadium celebrations and counter-terrorist actions by the Lao police are shown in the background.

Another thing that could be seen only in Laos, and not in any other former French colony in Indochina, is the many French restaurants and wineries on almost every corner. A wonderful lunch that would cost upwards of €150 in Paris, costs no more than €15 in Laos.

We leave Vientiane and head up north to Vang Vieng, a popular and controversial Mecca for backpackers, especially Australian. Laos is to the young Australians what Ibiza and Ayia Napa are to the British. In the last 15 years, Vang Vieng



became popular because of the many ways to recreate and have fun – from riding a bike in idyllic surroundings to hiking, exploring dozens of caves, swimming in their cold emerald green waters and tubing.

The latter is the most popular recreational activity, but also the most dangerous. Until recently, 20 to 30 lost their lives each year on tubes, mostly young Australians. When the Australian government confronted the Lao government about this, the situation did somewhat improve. So, what is tubing? Tubing is a recreational activity where an individual rides on top of an inner tube down the rapids of the Nam Song River. The problem was

that, in most cases, the people riding on these tubes were high on drugs. After spending a day on a beach, island or bar party, these young people would take drugs (like a lethal combination of opium and lime juice), crank up trance music, go down the river on a tube and get themselves killed. In the past few years, since tougher control over tubing has been introduced, the number of people killed on tubing has gone down significantly.

We chose to ride bicycles for several hours in the 40°C heat, and, to reward ourselves later, swim in ice cold waters of the Blue Lagoon. In the evening, we sat down to have a meal in one of the quaint restaurants in the Vang Vieng high street which cost us (the five of us) only €15. A dog was lying on the table next to ours. After the dinner, we treated ourselves to a foot massage to relieve the pain of pushing pedals all day. A half an hour long foot massage will set you back €3.

If you consider the prices (of food, drink, accommodation, massages), which are incredibly low compared to Serbia, it is easy to understand why Vang Vieng and all of Laos became a Mecca for tourists from Australia and other countries.

We chose to ride bicycles for several hours in the 40°C heat, and, to reward ourselves later, swim in ice cold waters of the Blue Lagoon. In the evening, we sat down to have a meal in one of the quaint restaurants in the Vang Vieng high street which cost us (the five of us) only €15.

CROISSANTS AND FRENCH WINES ON THE BANK OF THE MEKONG RIVER

The next morning, we boarded a mini-bus and headed to the old capital of Lao monarchy – Luang Prabang. We had an older American gentleman called Chuck with us who was well into his sixties. A retired biologist, Chuck travelled the whole world. “I have enough money to stay in expensive hotels, but I always choose hostels or guesthouses since they are full of life. You will not learn anything about life by staying in a five-star hotel,” Chuck said. He thought, just like most people here, that we were Russians. Later, a few hours into the conversation, he made an interesting comparison: “You Serbs are to the Russians, what the Canadians are to the Americans – similar, but better and less arrogant.”

After a six-hour drive along the narrow and sometimes completely rundown mountain roads, we arrive at Luang Prabang, the former capital city of the Kingdom of Laos. As it turns out, they don’t take online bookings seriously here, so we had to find accommodation in another hostel, just a few metres from the bank of the river Mekong. Luang Prabang has almost 60,000 inhabitants and is located on the peninsula at the estuary of the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers. The town is a fantastic mixture of incredibly well-preserved houses and villas in the early 20th cen-

tury colonial style and dozens of spectacular Buddhist temples. Occasionally, the town resembles Venice. It seems that there are no permanent residents here, only tourists, souvenir vendors, masseuses, waiters, chefs and Buddhist monks. Many French restaurants, wineries and bakeries look even more impressive than those in Vientiane, since there is no heavy traffic or concrete business buildings to spoil the landscape.

THE MYSTERIOUS DESTINY OF THE LAST KING OF LAOS

The former Royal Palace, which today houses the National Museum, dominates the town’s horizon. The last king of Laos Savanga Vatana and his family were overthrown by the revolutionaries in 1975 and, two years later, the king and his family were thrown in a prison camp in the north of the country where he and the queen allegedly died of malaria. The exact date of their death is unknown.

In the 1920s, Christopher Kremmer wrote a book about the Lao royal family called “Bamboo Palace: Discovering the Lost Dynasty of Laos.” The Royal Palace houses the royal family portraits, the gifts they received from statesmen and guests from all over the world, and a collection of vintage cars which were almost all gifts from the US government in the 1950s and 1960s. The US government had been wholeheartedly helping the royal family during their reign in an effort to stop communism spreading in this rather isolated kingdom.

Later, during the Second Indochina War (1960-1975), the Americans threw tons and tons of bombs on Laos with the purpose of ruining the communist guerrilla movement of the Pathen Lao and North Vietnamese troops which came to guerrilla’s aid. Because of that, Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world, the consequences of which can still be felt today, as well as a country with the biggest number of unexploded missiles in the world, which are scattered all over the country, especially the north.

One of the most important rituals that take place in the streets of Luang Prabang at 6 o’clock each morning is sharing food with the monks. The residents, and as of recently the tourists too, wait in line and share sticky rice (hard-boiled compact rise) with dozens of monks who come here with bowls in their hands.

The difference in the mentality of the Lao population was very evident after 1975 too when every single country in French Indochina came under communist rule. In Cambodia, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge massacred over two million people in their attempt to deurbanize (expel people from cities to villages), with hundreds of monks escaping to Laos where the communist regime had been much ‘softer’ compared to the Cambodian or Vietnamese. Something like the Yugoslav Communist regime compared to the regimes in Eastern Europe.

As we leave Laos and wait for our plane at a small airport in Luang Prabang, which you can reach on foot since it is almost in the town itself, I am wondering why is it that the people

here, who suffered a great deal under the surrounding countries and the US bombers, don’t hate the Thai or the Vietnamese or the Americans. I remembered something that a taxi driver from Andorra, who was married to a Cambodian woman, told me a month ago: “The Thai are friendly, but all they are actually thinking about is how to get the most out of a tourist. The Lao and Cambodians are different – when they smile, they really mean it.”



As we leave Laos and wait for our plane at a small airport in Luang Prabang, I am wondering why is it that the people here, who suffered a great deal under the surrounding countries and the US bombers, don’t hate the Thai or the Vietnamese or the Americans



Shangri-La, a fictional valley described in the 1933 novel Lost Horizon by British author James Hilton, was subsequently ‘discovered’ in Asia too. Thinking of Luang Prabang, as the last stop on our voyage through this wonderful country, it seems that Laos, out of all countries affected by the ‘plagues’ of the 20th century, is the closest to becoming the modern day Shangri-La. ■