travels

LAOS

Shangri-La Beneath

HAMMER AND SICKLE

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'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 political 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 to 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 3,000 kip) 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/poet/shaman Luang Pu Bunleua Sulliavat in 1958. The park does resemble the parks in Western Europe a little bit with 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 Khaoa in the town of Nong Khram.

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 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-
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, 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 buildings to spoil the landscape.

As we leave Laos and wait for our plane at a small airport in Luang Prabang, I am wondering why it is 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. We have left Laos, out of all countries affected by the ‘plagues’ of the 20th century, is the closest to becoming the modern day Shangri-La.