

Letter #7 - Vietnam and Laos

or All Is Forgotten

Young, hip, wired: From our perspective in Hanoi–Ha Noi–this is a young country, its people fashionable and energetic. Although the north used to be considered sleepy, Hanoi feels like Manhattan and life has an urgent, frenetic quality. Focus is required, even to cross the streets where whizzing motorcycles and cars rarely even stop for red. There is a skill to be learned, applicable to life, in which you must sense the moment, step forward and move at an even pace toward your destination. It is hard to describe the thrill and sense of accomplishment we feel in simply reaching the far curb. My daughter wonders if we have become adrenaline junkies.

Reaching the far side seems somewhat of a metaphor for the sense I get of the country itself: eyes on the future, not the past. With its youthful, tech-savvy population, who remembers?!

Even at the crashed B-52 memorial, I feel this disconnect. During 1972, following

major North Vietnamese advances, the US stepped up bombing missions. This particular bomber was shot down and its wreckage remains in a neighborhood pond, Huu Tiep, or B-52 Lake. When we go to visit it, I am greeted in enthusiastic English by three lively middle schoolgirls who ask to take my photo. Then I take theirs. It is one of those travel connections, a moving reminder of just how far our two nations have traveled.

So does a visit to Hoa Lo Prison, or the infamous Hanoi Hilton, where captured American soldiers were held. Over the entrance is inscribed its original name, La Maison Centrale. Along with Vietnamese school children, we learn that the French used it to imprison, torture–and guillotine–anti-colonial activists.

Laos had its own colonial-royalist-communist struggles. America conducted a “secret,” undeclared war here, during what the Lao refer to as the Second Indochina War. Today, like Vietnam, the country is connected by internet and media to the world, while the communist old-guard clings to its rule (in Hanoi, at least, by revolutionary banners and nagging slogans that I get the feeling are simply ignored).

In the former royal town of Luang Prabang, we see many red flags with gold stars and hammer and sickle signs. Even next to the old Buddhist temples, or vats, that are everywhere. School kids wear little red scarves while young, saffron-clad monks stroll the quiet old streets,



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along with backpackers and upscale tourists.

Buddhism is so integrated in the life that every alley seems to lead to a shady vat compound. Some of the monks are just boys, with mischievous grins, while the older ones text and chat. Not sure of the protocol, at first I avoid eye contact but later return grins and greetings. Sabaidee, we say, palms folded together as in India and Thailand, the standard greeting in Laos.

Later we go to the Luang Prabang library to join the daily English-speaking session. We are joined by Boum, a whip-smart sixteen year-old novice whose village has no secondary school, so at age eleven he decided to come here. Every morning he studies at the vat, then comes to speak English and use the computer at the library. At 5:30 he takes English class then walks an hour to his “home” monastery. His younger brother is with him, otherwise he sees his family twice a year. He loves the excitement of his life and who knows where it will lead. In the meantime we will become Facebook friends.



Luang Prabang is a World Heritage town, an elegant mix of traditional Lao, French colonial and Buddhist architecture bounded by the Mekong and Nam Kham rivers, the far slopes terraced with vegetables and rice. Life is slower paced than in the capital, Vientiane, and people seem tolerant of visitors yet rooted in their own ways. This is a gentle world out of time, where life has a dreamy quality, and contradictions seem to coexist in peace.

Of course, tensions must exist. I see an artistic shopkeeper shut down two tourists asking about old maps and recall the old Soviet Union where maps were nonexistent, information tightly guarded. Power is paranoid. Yet I can almost sympathize with the government’s prohibition against its people having intimate relations with foreigners. Thailand’s sex tourism is a cautionary tale. Like Bhutan, Laos is trying to strike its own path as it meets the future.



Tomorrow: Up the Mekong

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