

Serenity casts its spell in Laos

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A journey down the mighty Mekong to sleepy Luang Prabang! I'm having a Laos flashback. It lacks the drugs, Vietcong and Jim Morrison of 'Nam, but still has sticky heat, American jeeps and, most memorably, the goulash-coloured surge of the Mekong. I'm reliving my last visit, when I took a south-east Asian road trip. After the traffic, tarmac and manic buzz of Thailand, we crossed the vast river into south central Laos on a rusty barge. Sitting on the roof of our Land Rover I watched a sandstorm tango towards us across the water as lightning crackled in an angry sky, freeze-framing distant limestone karsts. We were greeted by the hammer and sickle flag, old US military vehicles driven by border guards and dirt roads dissecting land littered with unexploded cluster bombs from the "secret war". Fast-forward several years, travel 600km north and once again I'm crossing the Mekong border. This time the sky's less theatrical, the flag ? the Laotian stripes and circle rather than Communist insignia ? less intimidating, my trip less freewheeling. I'm on an organised tour of the Golden Triangle ? the region's fecund splatter of tropical mountains is now neatly packaged for cash-rich, time-poor visitors ? that provides an intense taste of northern Thailand, followed by a two-day cruise through Laos along the "mother of rivers", to Luang Prabang, one of Indochina's snooziest cocoons. My flashback might have lacked drugs, but this area is no stranger to them. Its lush peaks and valleys still spawn abundant poppy harvests, prompting a successful project by the Thai royal family to wean the country's hill tribes off opium farming and on to coffee crops and handicrafts. Its educational arm is the Hall of Opium museum, near Chiang Rai in Thailand. Who could resist that? So my tour kicks off with a brilliantly informative hit of narcotics. The V&A has nothing on this. Right from the 137m stone entrance tunnel, where skeletons, agonised faces and drug-racked bodies are chiselled into walls washed with eerie music and moody light, this is as trippy as museums come. I'm transported to skies riddled with Greek gods, galleries of sallow-faced addicts and the creaking decks of Victorian clippers. I visit Siamese opium dens, mountain drug factories and Vietnamese battlefields. As well as inducing shame at the role of British merchants, the experience supplies some impressive pub trivia: Emperor Claudius's wife murdered her son with an opium overdose, Benjamin Franklin enjoyed a regular hit and Moghul war elephants were fed opium to control them in battle. Perhaps that's where I'm going wrong. An hour or so later, in a bid to experience the traditional form of transport in the bamboo jungle, I find myself perched on the neck of a three-tonne animal called Bo. She's drug-free. It's me who needs the opium. The gorgeous Bo is one of 34 elephants at the Anantara Resort's elephant camp ? a haven for animals rescued from Thailand's city streets, where they ended up with their mahouts after a ban on commercial logging. Instead of begging for tourist dollars, man and beast are now hired to teach those tourists the skills of the handler. I've enrolled for fast-track mahout training. It doesn't sound wise: the equivalent of driving an HGV on a provisional licence. I learn how to mount Bo, so to speak, using her leg as a ladder and her ear as a handle, how to steer with my feet and that I must never hug her trunk. "She could flick you 20 metres," warns John Roberts, director of elephants ? surely one of the world's great job titles. Armed with some basic commands: pai (forward); how (stop) and baen (turn) ? we amble off. It's more stable than horse riding, but that's about the best I can say for it. The Thai language has 44 consonants and 18 vowels. Bo appears, or chooses, not to understand my attempts to use it. Every time her regular mahout looks away, she veers into the trees for a snack, deforesting large swathes of northern Thailand. At one point we ram-raid the banana store. I may be the first mahout to need an interpreter, and we end in a muddy pool where Bo dunks me before hosing me down. All great fun, but I'd rather be on the water, not in it. It's time to head for Laos. So next morning I take a longtail ferry on the short crossing to the river port of Houayxai. If the contrast between the two countries is less dramatic than on my road trip ? the border post has guesthouses, tour operators and gaggles of backpackers ? the Mekong is still a major divide. On Thailand's west bank, fields of rice, corn and maize are woven with banana palms, fruit trees and neat villages, while directly across the water thick forest cascades uninterrupted to the shore. Above Houayxai's dock, shopkeepers doze next to stalls of local gems, alongside evil alcoholic brews containing snakes and scorpions: a cure (presently unavailable on the NHS) for rheumatism, lumbago and "sweating of limbs". And for the next two days that's as aggressively commercial as it gets. This is the embarkation point for our cruise down almost 200 miles of the world's tenth-longest river. This ribbon of water is venerated as a source of trade, bathing, food and fables ? the ngeuak serpent gorges on drowning victims ? and as a buffer between political ideologies. To that list, you can add natural sedative. The Mekong gets to work seconds after our departure, gently decompressing its passengers for two days, slowing them on to Luang

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Prabang time. After a few miles, it shimmies east ? Laos now owns both shores ? and we are engulfed by hills of startlingly fertile forest. We've entered the "Big Green". Hell, it's relaxing. Most slow boats are high on atmosphere, low on comfort, but the Luang Say cruise has indoor and alfresco seating, excellent food and a rooftop sun deck. I snooze, sporadically sitting up to watch water buffalo browsing on blonde beaches, fishermen, and solitary gold hunters panning through sediment where streams slice into the main flow. When our barge makes one of its regular village stops after lunch, I have to rediscover the use of my legs. Gon Dturn is a farming and weaving centre where tak taks ? long-handled tractors resembling a poor man's Harley Davidson ? are parked under stilt houses. An animist shrine with stepladders for the spirits reflects traditional beliefs, but village life is changing. Electricity arrived five months ago, after families sold buffalo to pay the \$200 connection fee. Most houses have satellite dishes and a Chinese corner shop flogs everything from spanners to plastic robots. One elderly gent sits smoking a monster pipe on his new concrete porch with ornate porcelain balustrade and natty pagoda roof ? his satellite dish clearly picks up Kevin McCloud and his Grand Designs. As the day closes, the jungle gets denser, its palette of greens more intoxicating. Tropical night falls suddenly and we're swaddled by forest in the teak and rosewood cabins of the Luang Say. There's fine food ? coconut chilli chicken, marinated beef ? and a surreal array of single malts, but the real luxury is isolation. I open my shutters, climb behind the mosquito net and dose until inky blackness gives way to a soupy dawn light. The Mekong looks serene. But at close quarters it's a troubled soul, all vicious currents, whirlpools and standing waves. Our skipper, Thitnat, never lifts his eyes from its surface while he explains his rise from bamboo pole man, pushing off from the shore, to speedboat driver ? one of the crash-helmeted "Mekong stigs" who complete our two-day journey in six buttock-numbing hours. "I study the water in low season," he explains, handing me temporary control of the wheel. "Rocks aren't the problem. It's the sandbanks that move." I felt safer steering the elephant. At least I was sober. Lathan, our final village stop, where I join local kids splashing in the river using reeds as improvised snorkels, produces a steady torrent of lao-lao firewater whisky. Sixty-eight-year-old Ton Chin outlines the distilling process next to an oil drum of fermented rice water, before offering a free shot of home brew. It's not bad. In a Greek brandy way. But it's a mere aperitif for the bottle of mengngot, containing a huge scorpion ? locally sourced, perfect for Waitrose ? that she produces from beneath her wooden fence. "It makes you more of a man," she says, needlessly highlighting my major flaw. "It's good for scorpion bites and pain." You're lying Ton. It's shocking. Paint strippingly shocking. But who's complaining? We're almost at Luang Prabang. After the Mekong's relentless jungle, brooding skies and thatched stilt houses, film buffs with fertile imaginations might expect an insane Marlon Brando. But instead of Colonel Kurtz we're met by staff in the crisp uniforms of the spanking new Aman hotel ? the city's latest notch on the luxury bedpost ? with iced towels, rosella tea and supple-fingered massages. Amantaka's exquisite renovation of Luang Prabang's old provincial hospital mixes taupe stone tiles with a cream and olive colour scheme that's very Farrow & Ball. Twenty-four generous suites are laced around mango, frangipani and umbrella trees. It is particularly beautiful at night, when the floodlit Wat Chom Si temple appears to float in the sky, and lanterns litter the grounds. Outside the walls, away from the hotel's pared back elegance, Luang Prabang has more cars than I remember, but still just about merits its poetic Edwardian mantle as "refuge of the last dreamers". The city where 10 of the buildings are Unesco-listed is held like a delicate morsel between the chopsticks of the Mekong and Khan rivers. Its traditional wooden houses, 32 temples and French colonial architecture are threaded through a lush quilt of tropical vegetation, embroidered with lines of monks in saffron robes. Its appeal isn't blockbuster sights; it's Luang's mellow mood, sweetened by warm air, the putter of longtail boats and backbeat of cicadas. It's perfect for relaxed cycling, although my guided ride reveals an incongruously capitalist property boom. Since the city was declared a world heritage site in 1995, houses worth \$10,000 now fetch from \$200,000 to \$500,000 ? not bad given an average annual income of just \$700. This induces another flashback. It's London 2007 and the only "Charlies" around are smug estate agents. Around a third of Luang locals have cashed in. "They build fancy houses in the country with nice cars, cellphones and TVs," says my guide, Cheamoua. "Everything changes. Countryside, buildings, culture. Everything." Not quite. Bars above the Mekong are still perfect for chilled Beerlao at sunset, L'Etranger's bookshop cafe, all dark wood and scatter cushions, remains a top spot for evening movies, and the morning food market hasn't lost its ability to shock, with live moles, snakes and frogs next to dead bats, buffalo toes and steamed wasp larvae. I leave with some fried riverweed ? sensational with a buffalo-skin dip. It's typical. For all Luang's charm, I'm constantly drawn back to the Mekong: the trip's pumping artery. On the last afternoon I drive 25km to where it meets the Ou River beneath 200m limestone cliffs. I'm going fishing but, having seen our tiny boat, am slightly wary. No other river has so many flavours of

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supersized fish: the freshwater stingray, the giant catfish and the Siamese giant carp can all reach three metres. It's like fishing near Chernobyl. Even the names are scary. But for an Oriental version of Moby-Dick, I'm with the right man. Mr Boun Than, a former communist propaganda official, sports a wise grin, wiry physique and a Vietcong helmet, which is strangely reassuring. As we paddle past slopes of kale and peanut, he explains net fishing tactics: wear it like a cape over one shoulder, separate half into the opposite hand and fling from the waist, spreading it like a tablecloth. Easy ? unless you're knee-deep in red mud. After 20-odd throws, tangles and tantrums, I finally get it right ? and promptly fall in trying to retrieve my net. Two steamy hours later, we've caught a tiny bream, some midget shrimp and unidentified tiddler. As we paddle back, checking traps, Mr Boun tells me about a 30kg catfish he caught, "shaped like a shark". Not today. Our bag won't feed his 12 children, but he keeps the shrimp and bream for the pot, and there's an awkward moment as he watches me return the tiddler to the river. He sees a starter; I see a live offering to the ngeuak ? a final parting gift to the mighty, mesmerising Mekong. [Laos Thailand Vietnam Boating holidays Fishing in Laos](#) [Belcher Guardian.co.uk](#)
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