

# Magical Mystical Luang Prabang



## Reflections on a Journey



# Travelling Together

**W**hat a remarkably successful experience it was to spend time together as a group of SMX people who started as colleagues and finished as friends.

We are so grateful to Bob and Jenny. None of this would have happened were it not for them. And it would not have been as special as it was if their planning and organisation had not been so very good.  
We thank you.



*All of us - as well as some local Nuns*



# Sometimes together

# Sometimes alone



*Joan enjoys a good cup of tea.*



*Terry is quite at home here.*



*Terry and Adele are finding Lao beer quite acceptable!*



*Russell and Adrienne*



*Marissa dreaming!*



*Brian and Angela*



*Kay and Len*



*Margie*



*Barry and Yvonne*



*Kirsty and Lori-Anne*



*Clare*



*All the goods, clothing,  
ideas, knowledge,  
qualifications,resources and  
contacts I have  
Are nothing  
Without a compassionate  
listening respectful heart  
That is willing to let go of all  
And learn from the present  
moment*

*Lorraine Brosnan*





# The Mekong

**M**other Nature in this tropical paradise displays all her beauty, majesty and lushness. The soaring tree-clad mountains, the stunning Falls of Tat Kuang Si speak of power and beauty. Vegetable plots along the river flats, produce of the river silt, are bursting with life. The teak forests, lean and straight, provide timber; bamboo stalks have a multitude of uses; the arica - a superb tree. At the outdoor riverside restaurants potted flowering plants lend charm.

Luang Prabang is girdled by two rivers, the Mekong and the Nam Khan. The Mekong, jewel of the city, wide, majestic, beautiful, flanked by high, steep

river-banks. Neither swift-flowing nor sluggish – at this time of year at least – it goes, as it has gone from time immemorial, on its peaceful way. It tells the stories of the eons through which it has flowed, of the countless boats and people who have plied its waters, of the generations whose gardens have been fed by its precious silt. Fed, too, by its great variety of fishes, by its nutritious river-weed.

In the cool of the early morning, with the river traffic just beginning, the great river conveys a shimmer of peace over the entire atmosphere. And I, the onlooker, have fallen under its spell.

*Joan Mooney*



# Like a River

## Barbara reflects

In Luang Prabang our breakfast venue, situated as it is beside the magnificent Mekong River, was a perfect tropical outdoor setting for us to gather each day in the freshness of the morning air to eat delicious healthy food. It was here that I made a remark about the river to a Lao man. He took me over to a great view of the river and proceeded to tell me that as a Buddhist they are encouraged to live like a river. The river keeps flowing with ups and downs and makes no resistance to what happens.

It was the day before we left that I saw Nancy Dunne's beaming face coming enthusiastically towards us. She excitedly told us that the same young man had said that our group was like a river. We flowed beautifully.

Then I remembered: I was by the second most sacred river of India near Dom Bede Griffith ashram. I saw the women washing their clothes with great joy and chatter, men washing their buffalos that helped plough the nearby fields and smoke arising from a distant funeral pyre. As I watched a most beautiful Presence arose as the river. It was full of love that was so life giving, so joy giving without conditions or demands. It was Itself so vast and

bountiful offering no resistance. Why wouldn't there be a desire for your spirit to merge in its presence and your body's ashes to sink deep into it?

How was my Luang Prabang experience like this? How was it 'like a river flowing beautifully without resistance'? Along the banks are numerous eating places giving joy and vitality to many. All enhanced by the River. I could not possibly write adequately about the importance of the river. It manifests beautifully the One Essence, source of all love, joy and life.

As with my river experience in India so in Laos, it enabled me to know that whatever my eyes light upon there lies manifestation. Heaven is now and life flows wonderfully. It is true that the flow in the group manifested so much love, beauty and joy.

When I accepted Vieng's (our guide) many attentive, caring gestures to the very senior member of the group, what a lot of goodness, love and joy were manifested! This example was just one of the daily occurrences, too many to mention.

I agree with that young man: our group was like the river. My oh my, how superbly it flowed!

*Barbara Fingleton*



*Barbara fits so well in this frame.*



*Breakfast by the  
Mekong River*



# Laos: a world away from the everyday.

When you enter Laos you enter a place of peace and tranquillity. For me the lasting legacy of the trip to Laos is the peace and serenity of the people, which I feel is largely due to their devotion to Buddha and the following of this philosophy or 'way of life'. Though there is much poverty the people are happy and accept that wealth and luxury do not guarantee happiness.

It was so wonderful to have as our guide Fanh, who had been a Buddhist monk for nine years. He epitomised a man leading a moral life and living the ideals of Buddhism. Throughout each day he would give little snapshots of information about his life as a monk where he obtained a free education. He explained the different poses of the Buddha statues.



*Teaching Pose*

As a monk Fanh studied the academic curriculum but also other subjects such as philosophy, Buddhism, Moslem, Hindu and Christian beliefs. He displayed a very tolerant and informed attitude to all major world religions.

Our group from St Mary's was a very harmonious group and I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to



*Meditation*



*Earth*



*Calling for rain*



*Peace - no more fighting*

get to know members of the St Mary's community. I have previously attended St Mary's irregularly on Saturday and Sunday evenings but feel now a bonding with the Sunday 9.00am community. Making and re-establishing personal connections for me was another great advantage of a wonderful trip.

*Cathy Polites*

# The Mighty Mekong River

Sitting in a cafe overlooking the mighty Mekong river, watching boats drifting silently in the distance. Local music playing below.

One fisherman sits in his small boat, a speck in the middle of the river.

The car ferry moves from bank to bank connecting the village on the opposite shore to the city. Pushing its way upstream at first then to drift and glide into position. All day moving and keeping the livelihoods of villagers intact.

On the bank below a long boat lies waiting for the August festival

when once again it will be paddled by enthusiastic villagers wanting the honour of being the fastest on the river. It sits idle now, weighted down with bags of rice and protected from the sun by tarpaulins and bamboo.

The vehicle ferry is packed with eager motor bike riders ready to head into the city.

There is peace here above the river. Solitude and life together...

Further up stream there is a sand bank, a part of the far shore pointing down stream, creating a natural harbour. People sitting and a beach umbrella giving shade. No

doubt they are working... maybe fishing or digging for bait.

I feel at home here, where the peaceful people and the flowing river combine.

Butterflies flutter around the grasses on the bank...oblivious to the goings and comings of boats or people.

Tourists look on with various degrees of understanding and appreciation. A beautiful, idyllic scene or another commodity to be plundered ?

*Bob Dunne*





# Luang Prabang – Learning to Live in the Now

The early morning haze of mist and smoke from the village fires blurs the mighty Mekong River and the hills and mountains surrounding Luang Prabang.

In the distance the muffled boom of the temple gongs announce the beginning of the monastery day. The gentle chanting of the monks eases people into wakefulness.

It is now 6am and villagers and tourists make their way to the streets traversed by saffron clad, bare footed monks ranging from as young as nine years of age, to offer alms of sticky rice, fruit, and chocolate bars. Placed reverently in the begging bowls, these alms will be shared between the monks for breakfast and lunch, and with the poor of the city and villages.

The day in Luang Prabang has begun.

As a tourist from a so-called “First World” western culture, I learnt so much in that one week in Laos. The pervasive influence of Buddhism was apparent everywhere – in the happy contented smiles and demeanour of the local people; in the respectful and laid back attitude of the drivers of tuk tuks, mini-vans, motor cycles, bicycles as well as pedestrians – who all shared the roads in a seemingly haphazard and hazardous manner, but with no signs of accident, road rage or even the familiar Asian cacophony of honking horns; in the willingness of the people to share what little they had; in their welcoming and inclusive friendship offered to visitors to their country; in their apparent contentment with



*We thought Dorothy might take this small Laotian home with her.*

their lot, despite our perceptions of poverty and deprivation; and in their all-encompassing emphasis on joy, peace and enlightenment.

This spiritual influence of Buddhism on the culture of Laos as experienced by us in Luang Prabang, appears to me to be in stark contrast to the materialistic nature of Christianity with our constant striving to be better, have more, achieve greater heights. I think I now have a greater appreciation of what it means to “live in the now”. This knowledge is experiential and cannot be understood simply through academic explanation.

As I return to Brisbane from Luang Prabang and settle back into my busy routine, the challenge for me in the days ahead is to learn to live in the “now” whilst simultaneously meeting the daily responsibilities that are integral to life in our own culture.

The people of Luang Prabang have taught me a lot ..... but my learning has just begun.

Our visit to Laos was truly a cultural and spiritual experience.

Khob jai lai lai to the wonderful people we met in Luang Prabang.

*Dorothy Aldred*



*Even amongst the chaos of setting up for the night markets there was a surprising sense of calm.*

# Monks at Dawn ...



**W**e gather in the near-dark of early morning, talking quietly and looking across the Mekong. The mountains are just starting to appear through the mist. Our guide says it's time to go and we start walking along the street, enjoying the cool morning air. We pass ladies eager to sell us additional baskets of food to add to our small supply.

The light is growing as we find our mats laid on the side of the road, cane baskets of sticky rice and other offerings ready. We remove our shoes and tie our sashes across our shoulders to prepare for the alms giving.

Here they come towards us, walking the narrow streets in their orange robes and bare feet, silently...

One by one they open their bowls to accept the food we offer...

A flowing stream like a river of hope for a poor country...

Teaching visitors and locals alike ...

We humbly reach into baskets of sticky rice to give a small amount to each ...

Occasionally a biscuit or banana ...

The food is exhausted, but the monks continue streaming by... we have nothing more to give...

I stand there watching them pass...knowing that I need to do more...

The river keeps flowing and people along its banks work daily to feed their families. It is a hard, simple life with family, community and spirituality all combined in the ritual of life.

Two monks in a slender fast boat go speeding by.... heading down river to where?

The Mekong flows down through Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam to the sea. Quite a journey... I wonder what the future holds. Will I return here and stay with these people?

*Bob Dunne*





*Anne Neiland commented "Last man standing! What's he doing.....? Offering one grain of rice at a time or doing the loaves and fishes trick?"*



## ...and in the Evening

*We are welcome to join the monks as they chant each evening. We are expected to assume a respectful attitude in dress and stance.*



# The Markets of Luang Prabang

## Night, Morning and Chinese

At 4.30 every afternoon the top end of the main street of Luang Prabang begins a process of transformation. Small family groups of Hmuong who live in and around this heritage listed city gather on the footpath outside the National Museum and begin to lay out their wares for sale during the night markets. They don't take up the whole of the very long main street, but they do stretch along the street for about a kilometre.

By 5.30 the markets are in place. Steel posts suspending a canopy over each vendor form two long market alleyways with goods on plastic sheets on the ground and hanging from the posts and canopies. Each canopy marks a separate vendor.

For sale are beautifully crafted locally made embroidered or appliquéd pillow cases, cushion covers, bedspreads, wall hangings, handbags,

purses, tote bags, wallets, clothing... Most are embroidered or applied on silk or cotton material, some in neutral colours, others in bright beautiful jewel like-colours. The Hmuong specialise in embroidery and applique articles. (see below)

Woven goods in silk and cotton are also for sale: scarves, lengths of beautiful terials with the wide intricately woven borders.

By 8.30 pm, the alleyways are crowded and bustling with tourists and visitors. The only locals are those doing the selling. The handmade articles are cheap by our standards with deals done in US dollars, Thai Baht or Kip, the local currency.

By 11.00 pm all is quiet and the markets have vanished from the street to return and set up again the next night.



## Morning Markets

The morning markets however are for the locals and are well underway by 5am. All manner of fresh food: fish, plucked and skinny chickens, river weed, chillies, garlic, all sorts of green leafy vegetables and grasses, herbs, fruit, some familiar to us, some not, many different varieties of rice, cooking containers and utensils woven from bamboo...

The buyers and sellers here are locals shopping for their restaurants or their families.







## Chinese Markets

We visited the Chinese markets on the outskirts of the city on our way to the way to the Orphanage School. They are open all day and sell everything. EVERYTHING! White goods, all sorts of clothing, shoes, flip-flops, household items, machinery spare parts, toys and more, more, more. Racks of clothing, piles of shoes, crowded shelves and spaces. The customers are a mix of locals and visitors. Daunting is the volume of things for sale. A place of serious business.

*Adrienne Mc Darra*





# Presentation of the work of the Mines Advisory Group

**L**ao PDR is the most heavily bombed country, per capita, in history

Approximately 25% of villages in Laos are contaminated with Unexploded Ordnance (UXO)

More than 580,000 bombing missions were conducted over Laos

Over 2 million tons of ordnance were dropped on Laos between 1964 and 1973

Up to 30% failed to detonate

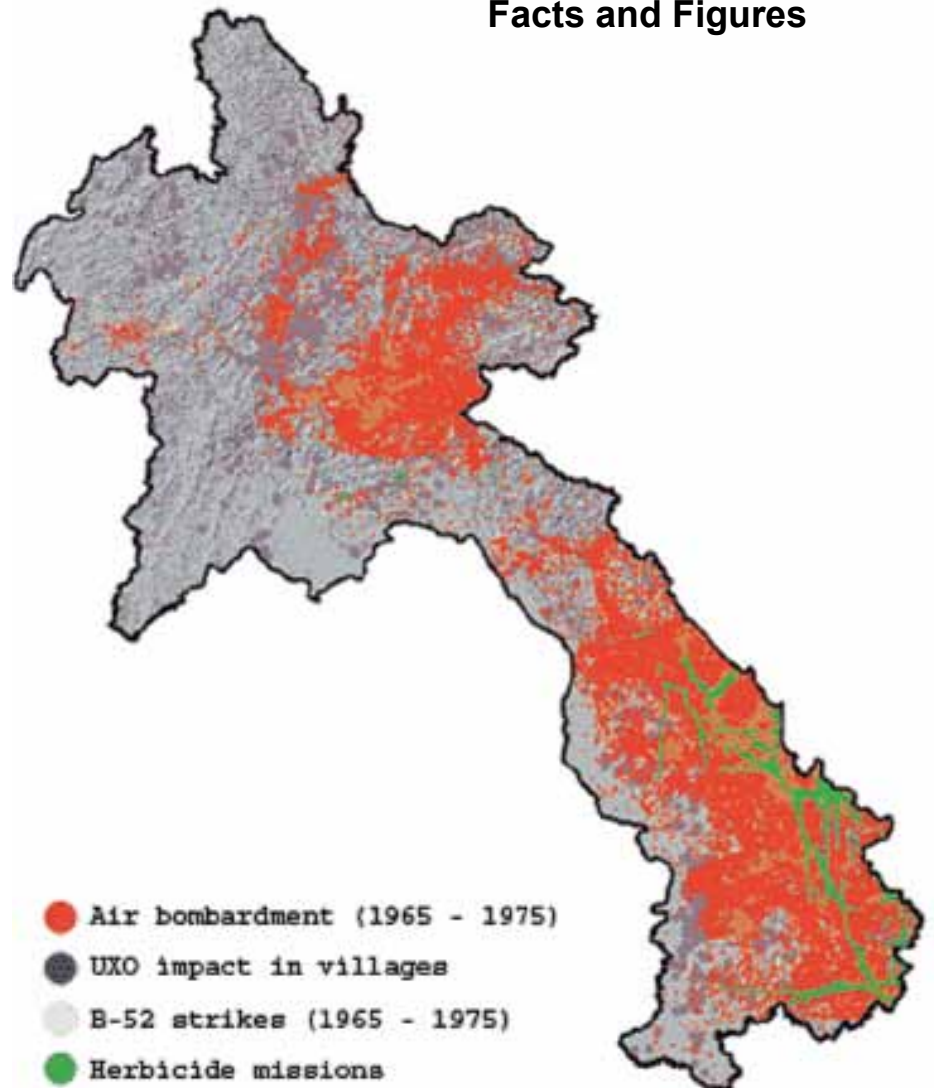
Approximately 80 million unexploded bombs remained in Laos after the war

All 17 provinces of Laos suffer from UXO contamination

41 out of the 46 poorest districts in Laos have UXO contamination

Over 50,000 people have been killed or injured as a result of UXO accidents in the period 1964 -2008

## Facts and Figures



## We reflect on the Presentation

**I** was shocked to be reminded that the country not officially in the war was the most bombed...every 9 minutes for 9 years was a statistic never to be forgotten.

Explains totally why “Surviving the Peace” is an ongoing, heartbreaking and economically crippling reality.

I was equally shocked at the omission of Afghanistan which Simon acknowledged. What state will that long suffering country be left in after 20014?

Sally Sara of the ABC spoke at the UN Women’s Breakfast about the current impact of mortars

and unexploded devices from the cluster bombs so cheaply manufactured by the Taliban. She talked about the longevity of the trauma, the precariousness of life when treading the earth of your home land, your village, your school can result in death or being maimed for life.

Hearing this 4 days after returning from our trip only confirms the atrocities and suffering of the innocents in war. How can Afghanistan ever achieve peace and safety for its people, particularly its Hazaras?

*Adele Rice*



# Surviving the Peace

Luang Prabang is an idyllic tropical Laotian town on the banks of the Mekong River and our SMX group was embarking on a Spiritual and Cultural Tour. In true St Mary's style we were to be challenged on the first day when we were taken to hear a talk from MAG (Mines Advisory Group). I must admit that prior to going to Laos the issue of mines and unexploded ordinance (UXO) didn't mean a great deal to me. That changed after the presentation by Simon and seeing a DVD as to the extent of the land that has been affected by and mines and other UXO: I was staggered by the magnitude of the problem.

A brief summary of the UXO problem in Laos is on the previous page.

UXO contamination is the key cause of poverty within Laos and is one of the prime factors limiting the country's long-term development. This is because UXO prevents people from using land and denies access to many basic services. This is why MAG is not solely focused on clearing land of UXO contamination. They work hard to forge close working partnerships with local communities, NGO's and local Government authorities so they are ready to implement primary development action on the land that is cleared. This approach is in line with the development priorities detailed in the Government of Laos National Growth and Poverty Eradication Scheme.

The fact is that it was American bombers that dumped the two millions of tons of bombs on Laos during the Vietnam War either in bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail or on their way back to American bases in Thailand. To assuage some guilt, the USA Government has given some foreign aid to help in the clearance of UXOs. Unfortunately with UXO this is an ongoing problem and it will take some 100-150 years before the people of Laos will have their land cleared of mines and unexploded bombs.

Some idea of the scale of the task is illustrated by the situation between Jan 2004-April 2012 when:

- 4,054 task sites were worked on by MAG
- 36,682,893 square metres of contaminated land cleared
- 157,701 items of UXO were destroyed, and
- 483,656 beneficiaries gained more safe land for farming, drinking water, latrines, irrigation for rice cropping, safe school compounds and tertiary roads.

What has angered me is that USA Government is not taking a more proactive approach to accepting responsibility to reduce the personal hazard and social and economic impact of UXO. Instead, it is leaving the problem to organisations like MAG to help the people of Laos survive the peace.

The phrase "Surviving the Peace" has had a big impact on me and I suggest that you all look at the website [www.maginternational.org](http://www.maginternational.org) to become better acquainted with the dimension of the problem.

On the 4th of April 2012, the UN International Day for Mine Awareness, thousands of people across the world made a "Safe Socks Day" wearing a pair of bright red MAG socks to highlight the part of the body most commonly affected in landmines explosions.

From the 28th March to the 4th April is MAG's Clear Landmines Now Week. Perhaps the 43 of us who went to Laos along with the SMX Community could do a similar thing to spread the word on the great work that MAG does and help the people of Laos 'survive the peace'.

*Clare White*

# Meditation with the Monks at Wat Long Khoun



Looking from the boat to the temple on the hill I felt anticipation for a special experience. I stepped onto the warm sand and walked towards the first of the two long bamboo bridges that lead to the stone steps. The bridges seemed fragile, yet like so many things here, were fit for the purpose.

Climbing the stone steps I was excited to see the mats and cushions laid out in the shade of trees,

ready for our chanting and meditation with the monks and nuns.

The meditation, there under the trees, was amazing.

As with many other experiences on this trip, it will not be quickly forgotten.

*Bob Dunne*



*Heading home after meditation at Wat Long Khoun*



*Walking meditation*



# Hey-dee, Hey-dee Ho

The Great Big Elephant is so Slow  
(But Absolutely Beautiful)

That was really fun. And a bit scary too. But in a rather nice nostalgic way. Reminiscent of the Big Dipper at Luna Park.

Riding atop those magnificent animals amongst the tree tops in the jungle was so very good. They placed each foot so carefully, on paths far too narrow for their huge feet. And we laughed and joked with the other riders. We watched, rather white knuckled as Terry, being the great Mahout, was riding on the head of his elephant as it plunged steeply downhill and into the river. Clearly he had nothing to hold on to, but stuck there all the same, looking nonchalant (with difficulty I imagine). And that tiny Angela doing the Mahout thing too. Far too small to be controlling such a beast. How could she look so confident? And she was clearly enjoying the ride too.

We laughed and we sang elephant songs and we lived in the now. It was so very good.

*Marg Ortiz*



*Tom and Mary*



*Terry and Russel*



*Adele and Adrienne*

# Visit to Orphanage at Ban Nadoo Village



*Some of the gifts we took to the orphanage*

While we were in Laos we visited the Luang Prabang Orphanage School in Ban Nadoo village. The orphanage has 600 children ranging in age from 7 - 22yrs. Approximately 170 are girls. Prior to 7 years old the children are looked after by relatives, but at this age the school is able to take students and receives some funding from the government. Many girls are kept by the relatives to help with domestic duties, which is why there are fewer girls than boys in the orphanage school.

Unfortunately the funding from the government is less than \$1 per day per child, so the school provides only 2 meals a day (lunch and dinner). We asked what it would cost to provide breakfast...40c per child per day. Unfortunately with 600 children

this would require \$240 per day...so not sure what we can do to help.

We took eight huge bags into the orphanage with gifts and presented them to the headmistress in front of one of the classes of students. One of the students sang a "thank you" song.

We were able to tour the orphanage... the sleeping accommodation was just hard wooden "beds" touching side by side.

We took various items for them with us in our suitcases and then we went shopping in Luang Prabang to supplement what we provided. This was helped by the \$215 raised by the SMX children.





We used this money to buy pencil sharpeners, pencils, pens and exercise books.

Some of what we donated included:  
150 Toothbrushes (donated by Colgate)  
20 tubes toothpaste  
35 pairs of rubber thongs (kids)  
Hundreds of pens and pencils...  
60 Soccer balls  
Soccer Jerseys  
Soft toys  
10x30 boxes of instant noodles  
Mathematics equipment for teachers  
Hundreds of exercise books  
Seeds of vegetable plants that they could grow  
Children's clothes.

We needed two Tuk Tuk's to carry the goods to the orphanage... and they were very heavy. Any items that were for smaller children will be sent by the school to the poorest in the local villages.



*Children from the orphanage*



*Dormitory at the Orphanage*

*Bob Dunne*

## Lao Culture with Francis Englemann

**A** purpose of our visit to Laos was to learn about the culture of this country and we found our day with Francis hugely informative.

He has a deep knowledge of Lao Culture, including the colonial past. He told us how Luang Prabang came to be made a UNESCO World Heritage site and how much benefit this has been for the city. He took us on a tour that was focussed on areas not normally on the tourist trail. We were very well informed after our day with Francis.







## Eating and Drinking was all part of the fun



*Eggs as we like them.*



*Our 'picnic' by the waterfall.*

## Silkworm Poo Tea

*The taste is fine. But the idea got a bit of getting used to!*





# A Moment in the Taste of Laos

**T**his moment is really two moments, but the core of both is relationships and bridges. At 8.30pm one Sunday night in October 2012, while sitting quietly watching my favourite TV show, the phone rings and the person on the other end was a friend from 35 years ago. Cathy and I have not had contact in all that time and she rings to ask if I want to come with her and some of the St Mary's Community to Laos! What could I say but 'yes'! It was all too strange to consider not going. That moment was amazing as Cathy and I had a close connection in the mid 70s and now it feels like this will continue into the future. In September 2012 I had just celebrated a major change of direction which was the result of some years of discernment, moving from the Sisters of Mercy Brisbane to belong to the new Institute of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea. During this time the image of a bridge was constantly part of this journey. Could I cross the bridge into a different future?

The second moment in this story is the 1st March at the waterfalls



in Laos. I was sitting at the 'picnic' table with seven other people. On my right was Joan, my English teacher from high school. Also, very little contact over the in-between time and yet I know that Joan introduced me to my love for reading which has become a great addiction. On my left was Cathy, the story from above. At the table was Lorraine who grew up in the same parish as me and shares many moments of my history. Kay and Len, new friends who

reminded me that laughter is the best medicine and story telling is an art, Terry and Margie who with excited understanding could share this moment. The 1st March at 5.00 was the time that my formal acceptance into the Institute was being acknowledged in Brisbane with the other sisters transferring.

At 2.00pm I left the group and moved down the mountain for some quiet time on my own. I kept walking until I thought I found the spot, sat down and looked up. There across the blue pond and tumbling waterfall was a wooden bridge. As I sat there looking at the bridge I knew I was in the right place at the right time, with friends new and old, with a path forward that is not clear but leads into new energy and life through a forest of green. I had crossed the bridge, I was connecting the old and the new and taking with me a peace and hope for the future.



*Margaret Endicott*

# Laos-There is an Elephant in the Room!

## Laos is the Elephant Kingdom.

**H**ow to keep the balance between tourism and the preservation of tradition and culture in Luang Prabang.

The t-shirt I purchased at the Luang Prabang evening market has across the front 'Laos the Jewel of the Mekong'. Well Luang Prabang is the sparkle in the jewel. Luang Prabang or at least part of it is a UNESCO World Heritage listed town since 1995. Under the protection of the United Nations, member countries provide funding and support to maintain the town and limit development.

Traditionally Luang Prabang was a region of Royal patronage and the seat of government. The French loved to relax there by the mighty Mekong river. In 1995 UNESCO and tourism arrived.

## Buddhism

Buddhism commenced in Laos in the fifteenth century. Today Buddhism is infused throughout the country. There are six to seven million inhabitants throughout Laos (12 Million in Bangkok). 1.6 million live in three populated regions, Luang Prabang, Vientiane the capital, and Savannakhet. Around 5.5 million dig out a subsistence living in the country side, 70% of the population is Buddhist, there are five thousand temples and nine thousand monks in Laos. I am guessing as this figure does not include the many noviciates- I am sure that most of these Temples and Monks inhabit Luang Prabang as they were



*Buddah teaching at the Bodhi tree. Images on the temple walls emphasis the importance of the Teaching of the Buddah to the people.*

everywhere. Buddhism, however is very strong in the country side and waning a little in the populated regions.

In Luang Prabang the Monks and community practise Theravadan Buddhism based on the original writings, in Pali, and teachings of the Buddha. Aspects of Animism are integrated into the tradition. This branch of Buddhism is a very prescriptive form of learning and experience; every activity has some meaning. Males must wear the meditation scarf in an open style on the left shoulder, females in a sash formation over the left shoulder. All movements of ritual or prayer start on the right hand side, females must sit when offering alms to the monks; these are just some examples.

My general sense of Buddhist practice in Luang Prabang, is that it plays a powerful role in the inculturation of the people, who in return deify the monks and are supportive and keen to have them

in their community. The people of Luang Prabang are very, very Buddhist.

The Buddhist message itself seems clear –

- Meditate, concentrate/pay attention, engage in chanting (like a complex mantra) and many of your personal problems will be solved – stop worrying.
- Turn down desire, understand the cravings of your mind, and let them go- tame your mind. The monks practise a range of moderate ascetic rituals to tame the desires of the body and to enhance discipline. These include – living simply with a bare minimum of pleasures, they renounce possessions and worldly belongings, they are celibate, they spend a long time meditating and chanting, they maintain a constant mild fasting, two meals a day before mid-day, they undertake minimum sleep requirements, they make only limited social contact,



with their family and friends. Monks can leave their religious vocation at any time they wish; their commitment ranges from most of their life to a few days.

- Be generous, it is better to give than to receive.

- There is a general edict to do no harm to anybody or anything.

The people of Luang Prabang are mainly young, 35 years and younger. I saw very few elderly people nor were the young people fraternising, I don't know if this was cultural or the intervening hand of government. The average life span for a female (In Laos) is 62 years of age, for a male it is 59 years. The Median age is 19 years.

The people of Luang Prabang, with particular reference to our tour guides, each of whom had been a monk, demonstrate wonderful human qualities; they are naturally gentle, soft people, whom through the inculturation of Buddhism, relate with a heightened sense of attention, calmness and genuineness: what the Buddhist knows as equanimity. This relational congruity is a pervasive quality of the young people throughout this World Heritage listed area.



## Tourism

The national government introduced tourism into this place of patronage, to boost their national income. Tourism since 1995 is ever increasing and currently accounts for 15% of national income. Following my recent trip there, I can verify the presence of many tourists, European and Asian, spending their money at the various restaurants, markets, massage places and tourist attractions. (For me the elephant ride and the mines advisory group MAG, clearing unexploded ordnances, remnants of the Vietnam war, from the Laos countryside, won the day – then everything was good.) Tourists moved quickly through this UNESCO protected town, spending their money, leaving behind the trappings of their presence, the impressions of their own culture, with the Americans, French and Japanese cluttering up my breakfast time.

Already some concerns for Laos in general and Luang Prabang in particular are obvious:

- There is a slow population drift of young people from the subsistence countryside to the three populated regions of Laos as they are attracted by the work in tourism, leading to a slow weakening of Buddhism in the rural areas.

- There has been a reduced interest in the area of the arts: painting, dance, theatre, music and fine arts.

- In Luang Prabang in 1995 many families lived nearby and around their temple. They supported the Monks with food and other donations. Since 1995, due to tourism development requirements (roads and footpaths) the families are moving away, making it difficult for the Monks to obtain enough food.

- Ours was a cultural religious education trip – amazing. However most European and Asian tourists are flitting through this World Heritage area, missing the opportunity to appreciate Buddhism as a practical way of life.

- On the upside, three hundred Thai tourists descend on Luang Prabang every weekend, to get a reminder of the good old time religion and to experience Buddhism the way it was in their country in the 1960's.

- As I sit here writing, I am struck by the irony that as tourists we salubriously overindulged in the 'house of plenty', while the Monks kept their food intake and sleep requirements to a minimum, and many of the people on the outskirts of Luang Prabang and Laos in general struggled to make a meal.

Oh well, it is the National Department of Interior that has to regulate the balance between Tourism and Buddhism. I hope though they lean a little towards the Monks, community and Buddhism.

*Brian O'Hanlon*

# Laos society: below the surface

Our visit to Laos was not 'superficial tourism'. Nevertheless, we can hardly claim that we have become experts on Lao society and culture. Personally, I was left with questions about how the national identity of this small country of six million plus with its 55 minority ethnic groups (2000 census) was being forged since the Pathet Lao communist government took power in 1975. This followed more than a century of external control with colonisation by France, occupation by Japan and the division of Lao against Lao by outside powers including the CIA and the Vietcong, often manipulating ethnic differences. The communist government took a right turn around 1990 as a prelude to opening the economy to international market forces and revising its hostility to Buddhism. So, we were told, the national leader is a Marxist – Buddhist. Even as we arrived in Luang Prabang my curiosity for behind

the scene politics and history was aroused .

As for the population of Luang Prabang, we learnt that hopes for a minimal disturbance of their evolving contribution to national identity seemingly depended on the area's UNESCO Heritage status, and the international tourists that would be attracted. The question of how the socialist government's official policy of 'ethnic equality' would unravel was barely on our agenda though it was provoked by a visit to a Hmoung village and informally, as one studied the faces of people in the night markets or sought a conversation with an English speaking waiter/ university student whose features betrayed his minority status. Then, I purchased an academic book at the Royal Palace Museum written by Vathana Pholsena, a Thai/ Lao expatriate from the National University of Singapore, which opened up the questions even more. She told stories from her

research along with revealing anecdotes such as “75 percent of Laotians watch Thai TV programs but only 25 percent watch Lao broadcasts”.

My conclusion (though this superficial study disqualifies any conclusion): the post script to the Vietnam War for multicultural Lao is that the pressures to modernise economically conflict with the aim of preserving its historic identity, and, as always, the real losers will be the poorest and most marginal ethnic minorities. Interestingly, Australia's Foreign Minister was in the country just days before our group. One hopes that Australians will base any friendship of Laos on a sympathetic sensitivity to the pressures on the marginalised.

The book referred to in this piece, *Post-war Laos: the politics of Culture, History and Identity*, will be available in the St Mary's in Exile Library.

*Noel Preston*



*Village life*





## Ode to a Flower

The Mystery of the moment  
 When I turned to look at you  
 The stillness of your beauty  
 Vibrated in my being



What words could not describe  
 A whiff of perfume revealed  
 Drawing to the nectar  
 Deeply rooted in your being

Forget the past and future  
 In this Eternal Now  
 You mirrored back the Essence  
 The Fullness in the Now

*Barbara Fingleton*





# Here we are - Studies of a Group



*A massage for Noel and Olga.*



*Where's Bob?*



*Anne and Pat ready to visit the Wat.*



*Lesley and Barbara on board.*



*Terry and Russell take to the road.*



*Joan and Judy on the river.*



*'It's all about love' - Vienne and Marg.*



*Doing what he does best - Doc is keeping an eye on the donations.*



*Cathy releasing bird.*



*Maureen and Neil enjoying the ride.*



*Margaret with the school children.*



# Cooking Class

**A**nother highlight was the cooking demonstration presented by the engaging and humorous 'Lao Master Chef' – Chai ("As in chai tea!" he told us.) Chai has a day job as a vet and has been developing a system for successfully keeping pigs during the wet season – a difficult problem in these parts.

Enlisting our help as his 'sous chefs' he demonstrated the creation of chicken and herbs in

lemon grass, steamed fish in banana leaves, and the obligatory sticky rice (with two dips). We then dined on these and other delicacies seated at long tables on a deck overlooking the picturesque gardens.

Sublime!

*Kay Holmes*



*Master Chef Chai with sous chefs (clockwise from top) Mary and Cathy ; Lorraine and Dorothy; Joan, Margie, Graham and Kay; Bob, Yvonne, Judy and Marissa.*

# So much not to see ... but so much else!

**“W**hat do you get from travelling overseas as a blind person?” is a question I am often asked; and Mary, my wife and constant travelling companion, frequently fields similar queries, such as: “How do you manage the whole travel bit? ... What does Tom get out of it? ...” Well, the recent, unique and fantastic Lao experience may have been by far the shortest of the four OS trips we’ve made together in recent years, but I would definitely have to score it the highest on the scales of sensory experience, fellowship, information sharing and good tour organisation and management.

So, it is obviously the sensory angle I am taking here, but it is in no way intended to suggest that anything I heard, smelt, tasted or touched in Luang Prabang (apart from quite a few Buddha statues), was necessarily anything different from or better than anyone else’s non-visual sensory experiences.

The sounds of Luang Prabang will long remain with me: drum beats, roosters crowing, distant motor boats, endless, but also generally unhurried and relatively quiet tuk tuks and motor cycles, masseurs touting for business and the soft but insistent marketers’ pleas for a sale. There were sounds I expected to hear much more of, such as feline and canine utterances as there were apparently plenty of cats and dogs to be seen; a few motorbikes rev or roar; a local person shout down a street to somebody ... perhaps even some sort of an alarm or siren. However, on the whole, I sensed an existence basically unhurried,



cheerful and contented, amongst quiet, gentle and gracious people.

I was seldom aware of strong fragrances, perfumes or the smell of flowers and blossoms, apart from the lovely scent of frangipani flowers in temples and even our hotel room for the first few days while the welcoming necklaces placed around our necks on arrival still hung by our bed. However, the smell of smoke seemed ever-present, to varying degrees, resulting from the myriad little fires used for cooking in homes and even on pavements. The smoke apparently created an often ethereal haze, enhancing the morning beauty of the rising sun over the Mekong river which flowed steadily past the hotel breakfast area where we enjoyed our first samples of local foods for each day. Everything in the parts of the town where we wandered seemed very clean and there were none of the unpleasant odours often encountered whilst travelling.

The local tastes, of course, always rate highly on my list of experiences to anticipate, savour, enjoy, often repeat and occasionally reject. From Lao beers and coffee, tamarind and other fruit drinks, through to the range of new and different food experiences, there was much that was very new and to be enjoyed, and nothing I had which I would not eat again. The regular but quite subtle use of herbs, spices and garlic with most of the chicken, fish and even buffalo dishes, I found mild and tasty. Nothing was too hot or overdone, and even the frequent use of coconut milk did not seem as rich as when encountered in many Thai and other dishes eaten in Australia. There were many fruits I had not encountered before and I particularly enjoyed the dragon fruit, tamarind and mangosteen, while the local papaya, the sweet and juicy pineapple and small varieties of banana, were all excellent eating. Lao cuisine is not big on desserts or sweets, but I could easily have returned for



more of the pumpkin in sweetened coconut milk served at the end of our welcome dinner at Roots and Leaves, or the purple sticky rice pudding served along with fruit at the conclusion of our Tamarind cooking school experience. With the remaining French influence in Luang Prabang, of course, the breads we had were most enjoyable and one could always sneak along to some little cafés for a yummy little patisserie!

For a blind person, the generally most vital and constantly employed sense is that of touch. There were interesting trees and bark textures, wall, floor and furniture finishes and materials of distinctive and different qualities, through to the more unusual characteristics of, say, the Chinese versus the Indian raw silks, the various textures and grades of thread and fabrics at the various markets, and the wonderful feel of carved wooden bowls, utensils and elephants of all sizes. It was



*Such intricate carving on the temple.*

fascinating to feel some large bells, the floor and hanging gongs and huge hanging drum in some of the temples and at the museum, but these were all eclipsed by the sensation of feeling intricately carved Buddha figures and ornamentations on temple doors and the many Buddha statues I was fortunate enough to be allowed to touch, both wooden and bronze. To do these carvings and statues full justice, I would have needed hours to examine, little by little, as only so much detail can be absorbed at once with the finger tips, but even the tactile 'glimpses' I had, were wonderful and spoke so much more than words could ever achieve. Once, as a small child, I did touch the leg of a young elephant at a zoo, but the experience of feeling legs, neck, trunk, back and even the surprisingly soft, delicate and sensitive ears, of the elephant we rode, are a very special and unforgettable highlight of the week – as was the ride itself, especially when Mary Mahout McMahon slipped into 'the driver's seat' for a while!

In conclusion, having only skimmed over my recollections from a blind traveler's perspective, I do need to almost contradict my title. Having had sight till aged six, and some useful residual vision till middle-age, I am fortunate to be



able to visualize very readily, and although my mental pictures may be quite different from reality, they are nevertheless rich and always a significant part of my experiences. They are formed largely from Mary's regular commentary and descriptions whilst travelling, and also on this trip, those of many members of our group at various times and, of course, our fabulous tour guides. I would like to express my very warm gratitude to all who generously added to my auditory, tactual and visual experiences and memories with their own descriptions, commentaries and direction of my attention or touch to particular places and features throughout the week.

*Tom McMahon*

# A Temple of a Different Kind



I didn't go to Laos.

I went to Christchurch.

People ask me why I continue to go there.

It is the place of my birth..... I have family and friends there.

But my connection to Christchurch is particularly strong because I experienced the devastating earthquake there on February 22, 2011.

So I returned recently, not realising the date – February 22, 2013.

The connection is now stronger – I understand the ongoing pain and suffering as the people endeavour to rebuild their city, but I recognise too the hope that is there and the indomitable spirit of its people.

The most significant experience of this trip was a visit to one of the many memorials that have appeared around this eerily silent, almost deserted city. St Paul's Presbyterian Church was near Latimer Square, the gathering place for the injured and the

dead immediately after the earthquake, and for the rescue services, anxious families, willing helpers and the media. Nearby too was the CCTV building where so many lives were lost. St Paul's was a large grey stone edifice with large pillars across the front, and like many of the churches of Christchurch, it went down. The site was later laid bare.

But now a new sacred space has been created, a shrine, *a temple of a different kind*. Row upon row, 185 empty chairs commemorate the 185 people who lost their lives. No one chair is like another; each is painted a stark, glaring white: a sea of white on the newly-laid grass. But under each chair a pot-plant blooms: 185 colourful reminders.

So many memories: a place, a sacred space, to pause and reflect upon the 185 lives that were lost and to give thanks for all those who remain and work towards the rebuilding of what was once a vibrant, beautiful city, my home.

I shall return.....

Jan Murray



# Building Community Spirit in Luang Prabang

Like migrating birds feeling the call to fly to new places, SMX badge-wearing travellers gathered around coffee tables or scoured duty free shops, waiting to board the Boeing 777 for Bangkok. Seeking one another out by badge, “hi’s” and “hello’s” to those new to us, and warmer greetings to those we knew, was the order for the day.

In the air, scattered around the plane, eyes glued to in-air entertainment or munching on boxed airline food, it was chiefly each to their own space, with the occasional “hello” or short chat in passing.

It was the tiny airport in Luang Prabang where, like school children on the first day, excited, curious, jovial, and for some, slightly apprehensive, where our guides, hands together in front, greeting us, Sabaidee, “Welcome” and our own Lao responses bring laughter, making us more comfortable as a group.

Then into mini buses, each with a friendly Lao guide skilled in making us relaxed with his laid-back Lao happiness and off to the town of Luang Prabang. We settle into

chairs, alfresco style beside the Mekong River winding like a giant serpent through the green valley and smokey mist of village fires. More relaxed, we take in others, forming first impressions, sniffing around and wagging tails as though in an off-leash enclosure.

The guides, whetting our appetites for plunging into a culture rich in Asian cuisine, spirituality Buddhist style, history and hope for their future, present the plan for the week. The feel of “back to the future” creates a group excitement like a revved up footy crowd. Still somewhat diverse, yet ready for common experiences, our comfort zone widens.

As the week rolls on, we kneel together to give alms to monks, ride elephants, meditate sitting, walking, standing and lying, or scatter like bees looking for honey to hunt for bargains in night markets.

All the time, hearing each other’s stories over sickly sweet Lao coffee laced with condensed milk, or eating dried riverweed mats (yuk!) and feeling a joint compassion for the Lao people with an urge for social justice as we hear of

the unexploded bombs that tear lives apart in the fields of simple Lao farmers, we rapidly develop a sense of oneness, a growing sense of community.

However, herding 43 SMX’s around an Asian town can be as overwhelming as a smoker’s room at an airport. Needing fresh air, the opportunities to escape for a nanny nap or to explore were welcome. Whether on a bike at \$3 a day, or chancing it with a tuk tuk driver, or sweating it out on foot, our intrepid travellers brought back their stories of chanting with monks, bargains in the markets, bamboo bridges and meetings with local people. Peppering our fine dining Asian style were stories of a wealth of experiences engendering awe and laughter, opinion and not infrequent naïve solutions.

All the time, the spirit of community was growing, binding us together as hostages to friendship and social justice. The Buddhist spirituality infected us with a closer Christian love and friendship for one another. Our spiritual and cultural journey motivated by curiosity for how others lived, cherry-picked the appealing Buddhist spirituality and sharing, and developed a culture of love, humility and desire for justice amongst our group from SMX.

May it live on and grow at SMX as we vow to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly as we return to the western materialistic Christianity of our first world culture.

*Bob Aldred*



*Getting to know each other better. Always someone happy to have a chat.*

# Such a Beautiful Place

## And Beautiful People



*Village women (right) turning the river weed into some of the delicious food (above). They sun dry it and add sesame seed.*



## Where Everything is Interesting