

Easy Rider on the Bolavan Plateau

I'm sure I didn't look as cool as Jack Nicklson in the epic motorcycle film on my rented Chinese made clutchless motorbike that topped out at about 60 km/hr but it still felt pretty cool. The Bolavan Plateau is east of the southern Lao city of Pakse. Its claim to fame is the Lao coffee that is grown in the region, which even by this coffee snob's estimation is quite good. Its other claim to fame is that eastern edge of the plateau was a major staging post on the Ho Chi Min Trail, earning it the title of second most heavily bombed region on earth. How they compile that stat, I'm not sure, and no doubt there are likely several regions claiming the title. As most of the "attractions" this area are waterfalls and rural villages the best way to explore the area is by motorbike. I had been reluctant to rent a motorbike having never ridden one before, but it became clear from talking to people who had traveled in Vietnam it is almost essential way of getting around there. So I figured there was no time like the present to learn. Well I could have perhaps picked a slightly better time, in the days before *Pee Mai* (the Lao New Year), more on that later, the kids were

already starting the water throwing prematurely. This meant I got to learn to ride while water was being hurled at me, perhaps not the optimal conditions for keeping ones attention on the road.

My first base of exploration was the village of Tadlo, which has become a tourist destination for its proximity to a couple waterfalls and several tribal villages. It's a nice place to relax. Days are easily filled with walks in the mornings to villages and swimming in the hot afternoons at the waterfall. In evenings all the tourists gather at Jim's Restaurant for a beer or two and some good conversation. In one



Kids at a waterfall near Tadlo.



Man fishing at a waterfall near Tadlo.

of those small world coincidences my first night in Tadlo, I sat down at a table with a guy who was from Lompoc, another who had been going to Brooks in Santa Barbara for the last three years (originally from Michigan), and a French girl who had lived in Santa Barbara for a year, all traveling independently. It was also a good place for my first attempt at riding a motorbike since it's really not much more than a village and a bunch of guesthouses with no "city" traffic to have to negotiate while I worked out the shifting. I made a loop around the area visiting a couple of waterfalls and stopping at a couple villages but mostly I just enjoyed the ride.

From Tadlo I took a bus, or rather a series of buses, further east to the less visited city of Attapeu. The 150 km journey took me 8 hours to complete; most of the time was spent waiting for a bus to complete the final leg. When the bus finally did come, it was so crammed with people that I was relegated to standing on the doorway hanging on for dear life and trying not to push the guy in front of me, who was hanging out the door, to an early demise. I had about an hour and a half of this less than stellar arrangement, before someone near me got off and as the foreigner I was given his seat. I didn't protest, and gladly took it and enjoyed my seat for the remaining two hours to Attapeu. Less than a 100 km from the Vietnamese border, Attapeu is heavily influenced by the large number of Vietnamese who settled there. This was the area through which the Ho

Chi Min Trail passed, so there aren't any structures that date prior to the war as the city was completely leveled. Although as it stands now you wouldn't know it and there is very little evidence of the city's recent violent past. Again the attraction is to get out and see the countryside and villages. I rented a motorbike from my guesthouse and hit the road. Being that this was the day before *Pee Mai* (Lao New Year) the party was already and I was hit with water a couple of times and managed to avoid crashing. I made my way to the village of Paam which was already in the party mood. The



Village man with pipe near Tadlo.



A waterfall on the Bolavan Plateau.

preferred method of inebriation this village appeared to be a tube based device for consuming Lao Lao (the Lao rice derived alcohol). The liquid was spooned from a bucket into a jar with two straws containing some filtering (or flavor) material, I wasn't sure. Two people then suck down the Lao Lao through straws. Fortunately the Lao Lao was much weaker than others I've had, so and I was able to keep the consumption to a minimum. Although it didn't seem to matter to the villagers that I had to ride back, they kept insisting I drink, even as I motioned to them I had to ride and then motioned too much to drink and then crashing. In one of the groups I stopped to have a drink with there was a one legged old man who had no doubt lost his leg in either the war or later from an unexploded bomb. In any case it was an American bomb, but he kept enthusiastically shaking my hand, I guess to make sure I knew there were no hard feelings. He was pretty much the only sign I came across that the area had once been carpet bombed.



Drinking Lao Lao in Paam.



Throwing water on passing motorbikers in Attapeu.



Villager in Paam in “the party” mood



Man plays mouth organ in Paam



Girl in village near Attapeu.



Man in Paam who lost his leg.



Community building near Paam.



Women harvesting rice near Attapeu.



Girl in the back of a tractor truck with the words "Love W" painted on it. I assume they meant to write "love U."