

Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang is the epicenter of tourism in Laos. If you're going on a whistle stop tour of Southeast Asia and Laos is on the list you're going to stop in Luang Prabang. As a result the streets are full of tourist and all the signs are in English. There are plenty of up market hotels and most western comforts can be obtained, for a price of course. However, there is good reason for all the attention given to this sleepy little city along the Mekong. Luang Prabang is a beautiful and pleasant place, with French colonial architecture lining the streets only interrupted by the sparking tiles and sloped roofs of one of the city's many Wats (Buddhist temples). At dawn, all of the city's monks file out of the monasteries and parade through the city receiving rice and other food from the community in a procession of flowing saffron robes that winds through the streets. In the evening, the night market bustles with activity as tourists bargain for souvenirs and the budget conscious tourist like me feast on an array of street food. Particularly popular with the backpacker crowd is the all you can eat vegetarian buffet. Where 50 cents buys you all the vegetarian dishes you can eat which you can wash down with Southeast Asia's finest malted beverage, Beerlao, at a dollar a liter.

After walking the streets and popping in a couple Wats for a day and a half I succumbed to the constant solicitation of, "you go waterfall" from the taxi (pickup truck with benches) drivers. This driver had already got four people so it would be cheaper than if I had to go on my own. In addition a day long city wide power outage had thwarted my planned Skype call back to the parents. Not even the epicenter of Laos tourism is immune to the, "maybe on, maybe off," power grid of Laos. I had heard good things about the waterfall but I was still skeptical as I had seen nice waterfalls and I new it



Wat Xieng Thong, most famous Buddhist temple in Luang Prabang.



Monks receiving alms.

wasn't going to be anything like Yosemite Valley. While it wasn't one of the most spectacular waterfalls I seen, it was one of the spectacular places for a swim I've been. There is an amazing pool just below the top most fall which you can get to by ignoring the "don't go past this point sign" as everyone seems to do. The pool is shaped like a bowl out of the rock and you can swim right up to the edge and look down over the falls and the series

of turquoise pools below. It's like a natural version of one of those infinity pools the rich build out in back of their multimillion dollar hillside homes. If the view alone didn't satisfy, the pool was deep enough to jump off the surrounding rocks in to the pool for a little added entertainment. While I jumped off a couple of the lower rocks, some monks came along later and put my efforts to shame as they did back flips and jumped from the highest rocks. I didn't try to match but I had to do one jump from one of the higher rocks (about 10 feet). I could have spent hours relaxing there and did spend nearly three before it was time to head back.

The complete antithesis of my day at the waterfall was my visit to the Buddhist caves the next day. I had heard mixed reviews about the caves, but I had pretty well covered the city and this was the one other notable tourist attraction in the area. The typical way to visit the caves is on a tour boat trip put together by one of the travel agents. I had seen the same scenery on the boat ride in to town, and that particular stretch was probably the least interesting. So the boat ride aspect didn't really appeal to me. In addition, I'm anti-tour, and looking at the map it looked like the town couldn't be more than a few km from the main road leading north which multiple buses travel. Of course this was as the crow flies



Me, relaxing in the pool above the waterfall. (see the waterfall pdf for more pictures)



Monks at the waterfall.



Village woman on my 2.5 hour 3 km walk.



Girl in village along my “walk.”

unfortunately I would later learn the road doesn't go as the crow flies. Ignorant of this knowledge I decided to try to do it on my own. A mistake my legs and my wallet would pay for. Everything started out well. I got off the bus in a town on the main road where the locals told me I should get off. It sound from the man at the bus station at Luang Prabang that I would need to take another bus, but it didn't look to promising, so I decided to start walking down the only road out of town going the direction I wanted to go, figuring a transport came I could wave it down and get in. As I got a little ways out of town a met a kid on a bicycle and I had almost decided to turn back and look for transportation for hire in town when after talking with him via a phrase book and my broken Lao I determined it was 3 km to Pac Ou, the town I wanted to get too. So I figured I could do that and kept walking. I had put about an hour of walking in when I met my next villagers who now claimed it was three km from this point. I had pretty much caste my lot at this point and it was Pac Ou or bust. I was fairly disturbed by the lack of traffic on the road, the only thing that had passed me was a couple of fully loaded motorbikes with no opportunity of hitching a ride. After two hours of walking, during the hottest part of the day, I came across another village and I walked down to the river to see if could charter a boat. There were only a couple of paddle boats so it looked like my chances weren't good. There were some kids, women by the river. I played the take pictures and show it to them game for a while. One of the older ones kept asking, for pen, money, candy, then pointed at my flashlight I had stuck in the side of my bag. I refused, not wanting to contribute even more to the culture of begging that is created when albeit well meaning but ignorant tourists who give things to kids. I was at least quoted 1 km by the villagers, instead of three, when I asked how far to my destination. Of course this was wrong too. I met a tourist cyclist about 10 minutes

out who informed me it was 2 km. At least I had a firm distance, although I was afraid how much it was going to cost me to get back to the main road because I really, really, didn't want to walk the two and a half hours back the way I came. I did reach the town, and just as I was arriving I saw a truck with villagers leaving. I contemplated hailing it down and skipping the caves as I had a sinking feeling that was my only cheap way out. But I couldn't do it, after the two and half hour walk in the sun I was going to see some caves. I made my way past the ghost town of a tourist market (all the tourists come in the morning on tours) to the river in order to charter a boat across to the caves. The boatmen know they are the only game in town and they are worse than OPEC when it comes to getting a free market price. So I had to swallow the overly high price of \$2 to cross. After all that effort to get there, the caves were less than impressive. I've seen much nicer. It was a cave full of sculpture that had been placed there by worshippers, most in from the 19th and 20th centuries. So it wasn't even that old. I was going to grab my flashlight to look in a dark corner when I realized it was gone. I wished I had given the kid my pen now, because I was pretty sure he lifted it. It was the first time I had been stolen from in all my travels, so I guess I was due, but it still irritated me that I let it happen. I suppose it could have been worse, like my camera, or money, but still it was a nice flashlight and there is pretty much no chance of getting an equally good one here. I hope he enjoys it. After a leisurely half hour visit, there really

wasn't much to see, I turned my attention to getting a ride back to the main road. I saw a truck parked out front of a shop and asked the owner how much for a ride to the main road. I was quoted the ridiculous amount of \$20. The problem with trying to get out of a touristy village like this one is everyone sees you as a walking wallet and they know you have few options. I eventually got a man to take me on his motorbike for the still too high price of \$5. But again, what could I do. I didn't even have a flashlight now which pretty much completely ruled out walking. As we road I was thinking the way my luck was going we were definitely going to crash, but we didn't, and in the only bit of luck I had this day I caught a truck bound for Luang Prabang almost immediately. As if I needed another reason to dislike the villagers of Pac Ou, as I was getting in the man who had given me a ride yelled out to the driver something in Lao and then told me in English I should pay the equivalent of \$1.50 when I knew the price should be no more than a dollar. When it came time to pay I gave the driver the equivalent of about a dollar in Kip (the Lao money), he laughed and accepted it. I was already in a bad mood and the bus station was about a 30 minute walk from the town center. I was in no mode to walk so I climbed in a shared tuk tuk with 3 locals. He asked for about double what I thought the price should be. I asked in Lao one of the others what they paid one said what I thought the price should be, the other two (monks) said the price the driver quoted. Of course the driver insisted the man who was paying half wasn't going as far. When the guy who paid half what I did got out about where I wanted to, I hopped out as well and tried in vain to get half my money back (I knew it was a long shot but I wanted him to at



Kid who stole my flashlight; I should have known he had a mean streak in him when he playfully choked another kid for the picture.

least feel a little embarrassed and no that I knew he ripped me off). This of course is the atypical Laos day in every respect; I've had almost no problems with over charging and nothing but great interactions with the Lao people. I think in Kip and when you convert it to dollars it's really not that bad, the whole fiasco of a day only cost me \$12, and a nice flashlight. Maybe next time I'll pay the \$7 and go on the tour, but I doubt it.



The cave I came all this way to see.