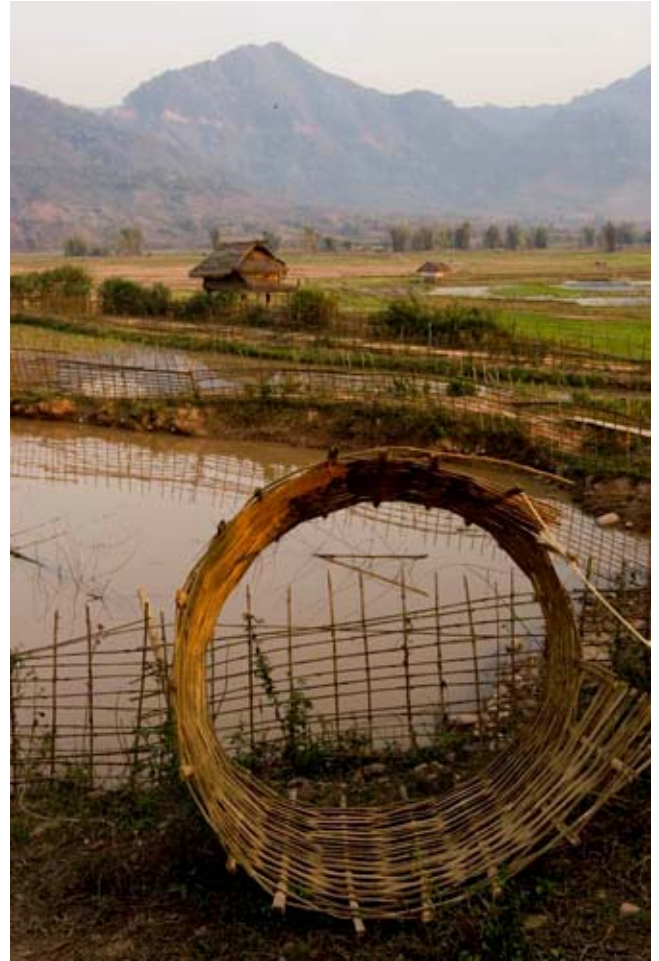


## Ou Tai

As I sat choking down dust cramped in a minibus with two occupants for every seat I thought to myself I better like this place. I had decided to go to this town with very little information about it. One person had posted on the web that they really enjoyed the place but any other google searches to find pictures or anything else for that matter came up empty. So of course, I was interested. It's a place you have to want to go, up in the far Northeastern corner of Laos. The only way out, assuming you're not Lao or Chinese (who could theoretically continue on to China), is back down the same bad dirt road that brought you there. As we wound down the mountain road, Ou Tai came into view. The town sits in a river valley at the confluence of two rivers. The steady supply of water enables year round rice cultivation so the rice fields surrounding the village are green with newly planted rice rather than brown as they are elsewhere during the dry season. My immediate impression was that I was going to like this place. I walked up to the one guesthouse in town only to have my enthusiasm crushed when I was told there were no rooms available, I then pointed to the phrase in my phrase book asking if there were other hotels to which I got a negative response. To which I replied: "I have a problem." Fortunately there was a slight miscommunication and the words for hotel and guesthouse are different so the place next door which only had a Chinese sign had a room. Although in true Chinese maximizing profit fashion the Chinese woman who ran the place seeing I had no other option charged me a overpriced \$5 for a shared bathroom bucket shower room. I switched to the Lao guesthouse the next day for a better room with bathroom for half the price.

There are three river valleys converging on Ou Tai so the first day I picked one and walked down it. I walked though one village and start



**Landscape near Ou Tai**



**Landscape near Ou Tai**



**Village home I ate at near Ou Tai**

looking around the next village down the valley when I was met by a middle aged man who motioned me to follow him into a house. There was a group of men sitting around the table drinking Lao Lao and picking at the food that was sitting on the table. It seems like the men in Lao do a lot of sitting around eating and drinking, while the women seem to be working constantly. When you're about to be reincarnated and you have you're choice between a Lao male and a Lao female take the male. In any rate I amused them and the kids that had gathered by taking a few

pictures and showing them on the LCD screen. And they kept motioning for me to eat something to which I complied not wanting to insult my host an indulgence I would later regret. Even as I was eating I was having second thoughts because the food was pretty cold. One of the men motioned like he was shooting something then pointed to an antelope-like looking skull mounted on the wall and then pointed to the food. I took it that the mystery meat I was consummating had in the not so distant past been frolicking through the forest. We ran out of Lao Lao and they suggested (hand motions again) that I buy us some beer. At 50 cents a liter I said why not. We shared 3 beers before I thanked them and went on my way. That lunch would cost me dearly the next day.



**Butterfly I saw on my walk near Ou Tai**

Returning in the late afternoon through the rice fields I ran into one of three English speakers in Ou Tai. He was a math teacher at the school and also taught English to younger kids in the evenings. As a first year teacher he was not being paid this year, but maybe next year he said hopefully. I went back to his family home for some more Lao Lao and tea. Yes, it's an interesting combination bus surprisingly common in Laos. I met up with him later for some noodle soup and a few beers, which seems to be what most Lao people eat for breakfast, lunch, and



dinner. We ran in to a Lao man and the restraint from a village outside Vientiane the capital and about 3-4 days by bus from Ou Tai. He was working in the logging industry (which I inferred from the math teacher's description of "selling wood to China"), and only got back to see his family once a year; a hard life for sure.

The next day the village lunch came back to haunt me. I will spare my readers the laborious details of the illness. Fortunately, I was not forced to leave Ou Tai on such an unpleasant note and the next evening my fever broke and I was able to get one more day to wonder the scenic countryside around Ou Tai before starting the epically uncomfortable journey back down south.



**Tribal women at the bus stop, Ou Tai**



**Boy jumping into the river at Ou Tai**