

Vang Vieng: It's not the "Real Laos" but it's fun.

If you're looking for a genuine Lao experience you won't find it in Vang Vieng, the riverside town about halfway between the capital Vientiane and Laos' biggest tourist attraction the city of Luang Prabang. The town was transformed, some might say spoiled, by its own popularity with the backpackers who fresh off the beaches of southern Thailand began to flock to this town starting in the late 90s. Beautifully set amongst Karsts peaks along the Xong River this once sleepy town now boasts an array of restaurants and bars that cater to the foreign invasion. If you've been knocking about the dusty back roads of Northern Laos, this array of restaurants serving up western cuisine to reclining patrons transfixed by TVs showing nonstop viewing of movies and reruns of American shows is not without its appeal. There is plethora of travel agents in town offering up kayaking, caving, and cycling tours but the activity that made Vang Vieng famous was tubing down the Xong River. What began, no doubt, as a few backpackers renting some inter tubes and chartering a tuk tuk up river to float down has turned in to an industry. A few local vendors selling beers and cold drinks to passing tubers has escalated into a riverside water park of one-upmanship. Bars along the deep stretches of the river elaborately constructed zip lines and rope swings which patrons could use with purchase of a beer. The resulting floating party is what Vang Vieng is now famous for.

While synonymous with the early 20s backpackers just up from Thailand, there is actually a wide variety of people of all ages and stories. I met an American on break from teaching English in Korea, a guy from Hawaii who now lives in Cambodia working at a dive shop, German from Nuremberg cycling his way through Laos, a group of face painting Swedes, and a rock climber from Michigan (Michigan



River, Vang Vieng



River, Vang Vieng



Me on a zip line, Vang Vieng.



Local Lao kid on a zip line, Vang Vieng.



Tubing with rope swings in the background, Vang Vieng.

people are everywhere I can't escape them). Perhaps the most "interesting" of my conversations was with the Zambian man who sat next to me on the bus from Vientiane to Vang Vieng who was just in Laos for a few days to get a new Visa to Thailand. After being initially vague about what he did just saying he did business in Thailand, and suspecting it was less than legal I dropped the subject. I was correct, and it turned out he was in the process taking over the family business from his father, which was importing

cocaine from Brazil and Cuba to Bangkok. “Like father, like son,” he said. Now how Zambian gets involved in importing cocaine from South America to Thailand in the first place I didn’t ask, but he did go on to volunteer a wealth of other information about the “family business.” He elaborated on how he always had his Thai girlfriend handle the deals, since the police would suspect something if it is a black man talking to a white guy but not a Thai girl. The Thai girl’s brother was a policeman and looked the other way because in his words “he takes care of her family.” The Thai girl also did the smuggling as well aboard commercial airlines. He bragged she was currently in the process of bringing in a couple kilos from Brazil. It sounded like a pretty sweet deal for him he takes in the money and she has all the risk. I’d never met a drug smuggler before, so now I can say if you’re ever in Bangkok and need some blow, I know a guy. Although, if he keeps running his mouth like he did to me he may not be in business to much longer.



Me jumping from the highest rope swing.



Popular bar along the tubing route.



Popular bar, with a guy in the background on the highest rope swing.



Sunset, Vang Vieng.