

Trekking in Muang Long

I went to the town of Muang Long in search of some off the beaten path trekking. The small town of Muang Long, or perhaps a better description is overgrown village, is two hours along a dirt and gravel road past Muang Sing (the more well know pace to trek in this region) by songthaw bus in Northwestern Laos. It's about 20 km from the Mekong and border with Burma. I had read a few accounts of accounts posted on the web by people who had done treks out of here and the idea of going where few have gone before always intrigues me. I arrived at the bus station, a parking lot in front of the market, and found an acceptable guesthouse. By acceptable I mean there was someone around who could show me a room and take my money, the first couple I tried didn't meet this criteria. The room at least had a bathroom although there was a small tank of cold water to use to flush the Asian toilet and a large tank of cold water to use for a bucket shower and no working faucet. So I really wasn't sure how the water got filled. In any case I found some where to stash my bag while I went out in search of guide for a trek. I ran into Tui (Too-ee) at his freshly opened, two month old, tourist office on the far end of the bus stand. Tui is the local English teacher and began leading foreigners on treks in the region as side job. After talking with him I decided on a three-day trek to the area South of Muang Long. I would be the eighth time starting 2004 that he had taken foreigners to these Akha villages. The Akha are the tribal group that occupies the mountainous regions of this area of Laos. The same group is called Aini in China and I saw a one of their villages when I was trekking there but in Laos with less interference/development from the government they lead a much more traditional lifestyle.

There is a range of 3000 foot jungle covered mountains directly to the south of Muang Long. The Akha built trail that we followed went directly over them. The Akha don't seem to believe in switch backs because the route was direct and steep. Fortunately, all but the very top of the mountain was covered in thick jungle and forest which gave vital shade. En route we encountered a small brush fire



Akha woman at the Muang Long market the women in the villages I visited were hard to get pictures of.



My guide Tui, and the small fire.

that was burning the layer of dried leaves on the forest floor. I did my first forest fire fighting with Tui as we smothered it with green branches and pushed the dried leaves away to make a crude fire line. After 6 hours of hiking through the jungle not seeing another person along the whole way we arrived at an Akha village in the next valley over from Muang Long. Entering the village I was like a magnet sweeping up every child in the village and a number of the adults behind me. We rested at the Chief's house and received some much need replenishment of our water supply with boiled village water. I think nearly the entire village, or at least as many of them as could fit on the Chief's porch, stood and stared at me as I drank my water. I felt like I was in the pages of National Geographic while surrounded by the Akha. The women wore elaborate silver covered head dresses and tube tops that they didn't seem too concerned about whether it covered or did not cover their breasts. Some deciding it had no purpose didn't wear a top at all. Others wore the full attire complete with a blue or black embroidered jacket. As much as I wanted to whip out my camera and start photographing it was just not appropriate to waltz into town and start shoving a lens in my hosts face so I resisted the temptation. Unfortunately we were not done for the day we had two hours of walking left to reach the village where we were going to stay. But fortunately these two hours were broken by a river crossing, which gave me an opportunity for a much needed bath and swim in the jungle lined river. Nothing works up a sweat like the walking 7 hours through the jungle, a good 4 of it uphill, in 80+ degree weather. The water was clear and very cold but perfect for me at the state I was in. It was hard to drag myself out of the river and persevere on to the village. On reaching the village it was the same drill as the first, magnet time, sucking up all the kids in my wake.



Swimming in the river after a long hike.



River near sunset

I was able to find out a little about Akha culture over dinner, which was rice, chicken soup with bamboo shoots, and of course the requisite Lao Lao



(Laos' version of rice whiskey all home brewed). I found out enough to know that if you are Akha you want to be a man. At an Akha wedding none of the bride's family is invited to the party only the groom's family celebrates. The daughter-in-law then has to wake up at 4:30 walk an hour to the rice storage outside the village near the rice fields and haul it back. Then using a teeter-totter-like mechanism they separate out the rice. The women step on one end to raise a mallet and then letting the other end fall crushing the

Early morning at the first Akha village we stayed.



Akha youth dressed to impress the ladies at the swing get together.



“Rice Crusher” sorry for the bad picture cropped from another.

rice. It looks like a kind of involuntary Stairmaster. Most of the time it is the roosters that act as the early morning alarm clock. In this village it was the thumping of the rice crushers (for lack of better name) accompanying the rooster's crow with a monotonous percussion. But back to the living hell that is the life of an Akha woman. After she has gotten the rice ready for cooking, she then has to prepare the breakfast, do the other house work, go out in the fields or jungle to do more work, and then return to do the same thing for dinner. While it seems common for sons



Children starring taken while I was teaching the grandpa to use the camera otherwise the kids were unusually photo shy.



Father of the man's house we were staying at in the first village.

to live with their parents until they can build their own house, once they are married they have to go sleep with their wives in the "small house" a room separate from the main house about the size of a king size bed. At the house we stayed at there were two sons and their wives sleeping in the small house. Not much personal space. After dinner we went to see the Akha equivalent of the "High School" dance. The single girls and boys in the village go to "the swing," which is at the highest point in every Akha village and build a fire. It was funny to watch, courtship is the same

everywhere. It was a group of girls on one side, they all had thread they were spinning with a top like thing (that is not the same presumably to show that they have good housework skills which they will definitely need), and a group of boys on the other side with a few of the more outgoing boys actually going over and talking to the girls. Apparently premarital sex is not a taboo either since if the boy and girl hit it off they are allowed to go sleep in the "small house."

The next day it was back up over the mountain but only six hours and not as steep to another Akha village. This one was connected to the main road by a small dirt road allowing motor bike and tractor-truck access. There were more metal roofs in this village. In the previous village, only the Chief and "second" Chief, where we stayed, had them in the other village. All of which had to be carried in on the back of some poor soul. They had clearly had more contact with the outside and my coming was not nearly as big an event. We had dinner with the Lao school teacher in the village who Tui knew. I think mainly so Tui could get the Lao favored sticky rice rather than the very plain low grade rice that the Akha eat. Which I concur is much better. And of course there was more Lao Lao which seems to accompany every group meal. The final day was light one with a



Swing at sunset in the 2nd Akha village we stayed at.

walk down to the main road to catch a bus (songthaw) back into town. I immediately caught another songthaw to the closest place I knew had hot showers, two hours down the road in Muang Sing. I pitted the other 20 or so people packed in the songthaw with me but fortunately it is well ventilated in the back of a truck.



Akha woman cooking in the kitchen



Akha woman with grandson at 2nd village