

Begging Lines



Begging lines were a new phenomenon for me. Each morning at dawn the monks from each temple go forth on a fixed circuit of the town begging for food for the day. The town folk set up at regular locations and offer the monks food as they pass. Mostly the monks receive balls of sticky rice, but also accept other items. Each monk carries a begging bowl and they walk in single file silently. The lead monk appears to be a senior monk, with the novice monks following behind. I wondered how full the begging bowls became, and whether it would be best to be at the front or the end of line.

A begging line filing down the street. Locals set up along the street and offer food, mostly balls of rice.

One temple was directly across the street from our guesthouse, and so the bowls that those monks presented to us were empty. Vendors tried to get tourists involved. Starting at 5 am, vendors appeared under our hotel window and gestured that we should come down and buy small wrapped balls of sticky rice. I got swept up into the action on my first morning, as I was up early trying to go bird watching. Mary-Slater got into the action on the second day.



Novice Vongsith from the Wat Visoun was happy to engage us in conversation.

We quizzed Novice Vongsith, from the Wat Visoun, about the begging. He said that it represented most of their food for the day. Sometimes there was a mid-day meal at the wat, but often there was not much food at that meal. Did they get enough food? "Not always." What type of food did they prefer? "He liked to receive cake." We thought about this. There is no reason to offer the

monks only balls of sticky rice. We could offer them fruit, or other edibles. They also like money, with which they can buy food or other items. M-S decided to buy oranges. I took the opportunity to get rid of my high-tech American energy bars. These appear to be candy bars, but are often so dry and healthy that one must choke them down with a liter of water. I had carried several of these bars on several overseas trips without consuming them. At last I could put them to good use. And the monks would have no desire to taste American food ever again.

Town women giving offerings of balls of sticky rice to the young monks.





Mekong Boat Ride

The Mekong River is one of the great rivers of the world. This was my first view of it. There used to be lots of commerce on the river, but as roads in Laos improve, commerce traffic on the Mekong is becoming less and less. There are still a lot of boats tied to the banks below Luang Prabang, but I suspect fewer than in yesteryear. And now a fair number of the boats are tourist boats, with covered cabins with seats. And it is easy to arrange a ride to the Tang Ting Caves, across from Pak Ou, where old images of the Buddha are retired. Our hotel clerk quickly arranged our trip and combined us with an Australian couple. We left about 9 am for a 5-hour tour. The Tang Ting Caves are about 20 km upstream from Luang Prabang. Postcards of glorious scenery were replaced by the reality of smoky low visibility. It is the end of the dry season and the peak season for burning rice fields prior to the monsoon rains.

There is a standard Mekong boat ride for tourists. And several villages between Luang Prabang and the Tang Ting Caves have become part of the circuit. I suspect that



our guide automatically stops us at each village, and to convince him otherwise would be difficult. Of course, we are tourists, and the villages do have handicraft production on display. There were two stops, each about an hour.

Making paper Ban Xang Khon

The first village was Ban Xang Khon, just a short distance upstream from Luang Prabang. Two



Drying paper at Ban Xang Khon

different types of handicraft production were on display. This was clearly a tourist show, but the paper lanterns and books were good looking and unique. The paper is often infused with ferns, leaves and flower blossoms. I was satisfied and purchased several items. There were also weavers making silk panels and scarves. I only bought one, as the night market in Luang Prabang has a greater variety of silk items.



Weaving silk at Ban Xang Khon

We continued upstream several kilometers before the second village of Ban Xang Hai. This village specialized in moonshine, but also had a few other handicrafts including some ceramics. I bought some ceramic cups. None of us indulged in the moonshine. The village seemed prosperous and neat, with

nice two story houses. A huge stand of bamboo growing near the top of the riverbank had some difficulty to see birds. I fell behind trying to see them clearly.

*Ban Xang Hai
seen from the river*





Moonshine still at Ban Xang Hai



Weavings for sale at Ban Xang Hai



Boats tied up at Tham Ting cave

images. One the way up we came across a boy selling birds to be released by worshippers. I was appalled, but wanted to look at the birds to identify them. One was a Siberian Rubythroat, a bird that I would like to see in the wild. I ended up buying both birds and releasing them, but I felt bad. Surely I was encouraging future capture of birds.

Buddha images resting in Tham Ting Cave



Tham Ting Caves



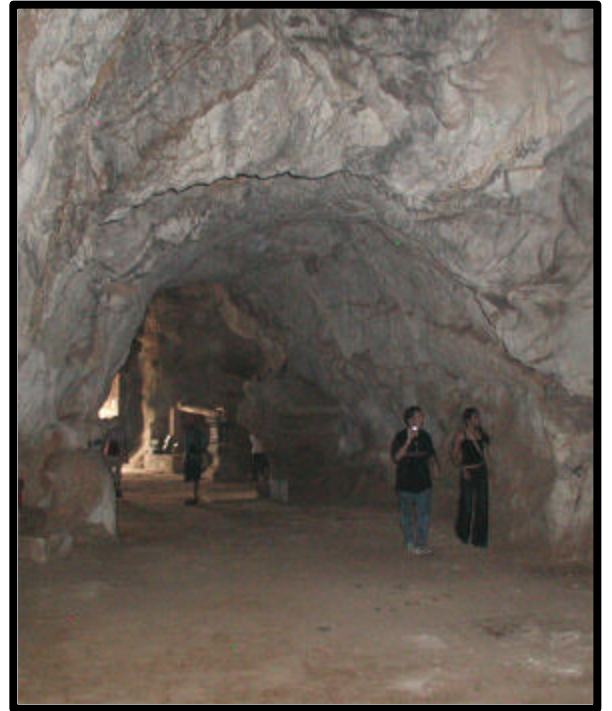
Inside the upper cave – stupa, buddhas and alters



*Monk visiting lower cave
Buddha icons*



Entrance to the upper cave



Exploring the upper cave



Fallen Buddha icons, upper cave



Sitting Buddha, lower cave

On the way back to Luang Prabang, we saw



fast boats,



tourist boats,



big boats in dry dock,



*but eventually
Mary-Slater fell
asleep.*

Sunday Day Hike – On the Opposite Bank



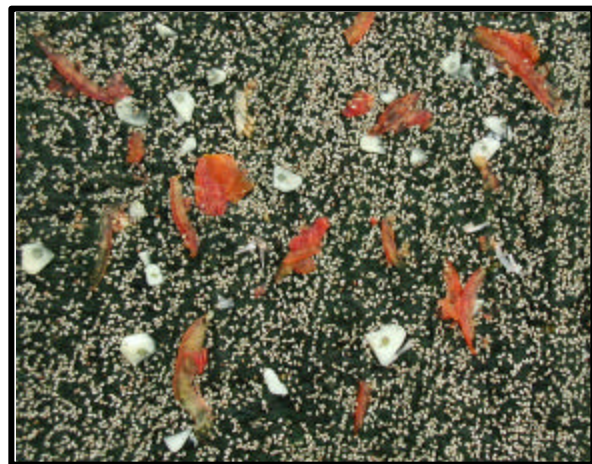
Arriving on the opposite bank of the Mekong River – Muong Kam

The hotel clerk said that he could arrange a day hike on the opposite bank of the Mekong. I stressed my interest in forest and birding, but I think that my request didn't register with him. Our guide, Sit, met us at the hotel at 7:30 am, but was unprepared for the day. "Did we want lunch?" He went to buy sandwiches and water. The hike route had changed. We would start with a ride up the Mekong to the village of Mounk Kam, and then hike a loop through two other villages, each a different ethnic group, before arriving back at the river on the opposite bank from Luang Prabang.

Moung Kam was interesting. The water level of the Mekong is very low, and it is the season to gather and dry riverweed. Racks of drying riverweed were on the sand bar in front of the village and throughout the village. Several girls were preparing more sheets. This consisted of spreading a riverweed paste onto a woven mat and infusing it with pieces of dried garlic and tomatoes.



Preparing riverweed in Muong Kam



*Closeup of riverweed
– Infused with dried garlic and tomatoes, and sesame seed*

Moung Kam



Drying riverweed at Muong Kam



The wat at Moung Kam

Sit said that Muong Kam had 95 families in it, and that electricity had reached the village in 2003. As we left the village it became apparent that Sit knew his demographics, but not the birds. I was, of course, bird watching, except that there wasn't much around. When I did find a bird, and showed Sit the picture in the bird book, he showed no interest. Instead, I think that he thought that I was out of shape and slow. We climbed up through fields, including ones that had been recently burned. The land is obviously heavily worked, not an inch of natural habitat remains.



The trail to Hue Pong passed through burned fields. It was hot and dusty, with bits of ash in the air. Soon the monsoon rains will make the land green again.



Burned rice field between Mounng Kam and Hue Pong

Hue Pong



Drying garlic in Hue Pong

The second village of the hike was Hue Pong, a Kamu ethnic village, only 26 families, with electricity due next year. We visited a couple of houses, where some locals were preparing to make paper handicrafts. Garlic was drying in bunches in front of several houses. We had tea and water, and rested in the shade for about an hour.



Mary-Slater with Sit





House in Hue Pong



Kitten aiding weaver in Hue Pong



Garlic drying



Mary-Slater and Jeff



Leaving Hue Pong

The last village that we stopped at was a Lue village called Na Bua, 36 families, with electricity. My interest was bottled water, which I gulped down. It was now mid-afternoon and quite hot. I decided that my energy level was low and that I should eat one of my hi-tech energy bars. It was a poor decision, as I had to drink the rest of my water to wash it down. I don't really like those bars anyway. I'd have to think of a good way to get rid of them, as I don't like throw things away either. The best birding of the hike was on the bluff overlooking the Mekong across from Luang Prabang. We stopped at a rest shelter, and lounged for many minutes, finishing off the fruit that we had carried for the day.

Princess Restaurant – Villa Santi



Menu of the day

After the long hot hike, we decided to treat ourselves to a big Laotian meal. The fancy restaurant in town is the Princess Restaurant, associated with the Villa Santi Hotel and Resort. It boasts of a cook trained at the former Royal Palace. We had the set menu, consisting of a variety of Laotian dishes. It was a good meal, but not outstanding.

The meal at Villa Santi – from the top clockwise: steamed egg rolls with pork, spicy pork salad, Laotian fish curry, grilled fish fillet in banana leaves, Luang Prabang chilli paste, spring rolls and sauce; center: hot and sour fish soup

