



LUANG PRABANG

A Week with

Mary-Slater Linn and Jeffrey Nystuen





Phosey Market



Royal Dancer



Monk Procession at Dawn

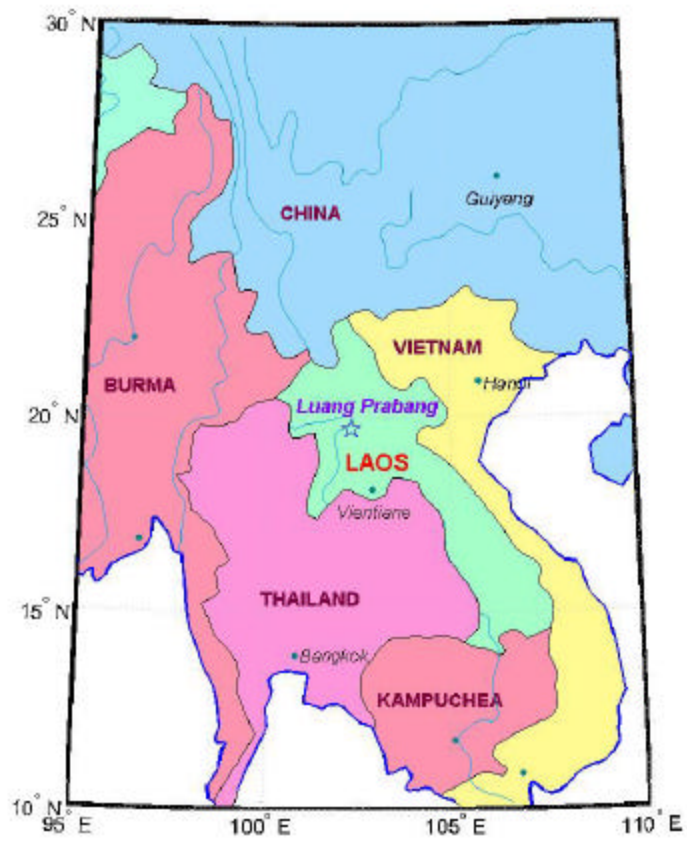


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Itinerary 10-17 March 2004:

Wednesday: arrive in Bangkok at midnight

Thursday: Fly to Luang Prabang – diverted to Vientiane by smoke

Arrive in Luang Prabang at 5 pm

Take best room at Sayo Guest House

Dinner at Street Market

Friday: Explore Luang Prabang

Visit Royal Palace

Visit Temples including Wat Mai, Wat Nong, Wat Saen, Wat Xieng Thong

Dinner at Indochina Spirit – very good

Royal Theatre Dance performance

Saturday: Mekong River trip to Tham Ting Caves

Stops at Ban Xang Khon (paper making) and Ban Xang Hai (moonshine)

Visit Temples including Wat Visoun (chat with Novice Sith)

Dinner at Visoun Restaurant – one good dish

Sunday: Day Trek on west bank of Mekong River – hot and smoky

Visit villages: Muong Kam (riverweed), Hue Pong (garlic), Na Bua

Dinner at Princess Restaurant – Villa Santi – fair

Monday: Birding on Phou Si hill – fair

Tum Tum Cheng cooking class – visit Phosey Market, prepare 4 dishes

Visit Kueng Si Falls – not many birds, tiger and bears in cages

Stop at Muong Khai Village on way home – beer with locals

Dinner at Street Market

Tuesday: Birding on Phou Si hill – fair

Drive with Mr. Phoumy to Hmong Village (Long Lao Mai)

Lunch at Malee Lao Restaurant – excellent

Visit Temples including Wat That Luang and Wat Ho Siang (Novice Doua)

Dinner at Nazim Indian Restaurant – very good

Wednesday: Feed monks at 6 am

Breakfast on banks of Mekong River

Final visit to Wat Xieng Thong

Fly to Bangkok



Regional Map of Luang Prabang

Legend: Mekong Boat Ride, Day Hike, Driving Trips

Villages:

(On the Mekong River)
 Ban Xang Khon (paper)
 Ban Xang Hai (moonshine)
 Pak Ou (across from Tham Ting cave)

(Day hike)
 Muong Kam (riverweed)
 Hue Pong (Kamu village with garlic)
 Na Bua (water stop)

(ride from Kueng Si Falls)
 Muong Khai (Lao house for sale)

(day trip to visit villages)
 Long Lao Mai (poor Hmong village)
 Long Lao Kuo (down the hill a bit)



Fancy old house in Muong Kam

Faces



Mary-Slater with kids from Moug Khai



Mr Phoumy, driver and guide



Kids from Moug Khai



Jeff at Kueng Si Falls



Mary-Slater and Sit On Day Hike



*Boun Khong Phamsavang,
Moung Khai*



Handicraft Maker, Long Lao Kuo



*Hmong Mother and Child
Long Lao Mai*



*Novice Monk
Vong Sith
Wat Visoun*



Senior Monk, Wat Xieng Muan



Home Owner and School Teacher, Moung Khai



Bug Hunter, Long Lao Mai

Luang Prabang – City of Temples

Mary-Slater Linn and Jeffrey A Nystuen

March 2004

The Arrival – A Smoky Diversion

Mary-Slater chose Laos as the destination. She then emailed to me her itinerary, stopping in Seattle on both the outbound and return. Could she stay at my house? Well sure, but what about the trip itself? Yes, I was encouraged to come along, and I could use frequent flyer miles to get to Bangkok. So I agreed, and another Mary-Slater/Jeff adventure was on. The plan was to explore north-central Laos, using Luang Prabang as our base. Mary-Slater had carefully picked Bangkok Airways to fly us to Laos, after having researched Laos Airlines and discovered less than favorable reports on reliability and safety. The guidebook promised temples, friendly people, handicrafts and food, but stated: “The rule of thumb is that if it has wings and feathers, it’s edible. In some areas, such as Luang Prabang, the province’s birds have long been eaten.” Hmmm.

The flight to Bangkok via Tokyo was uneventful. We arrived at midnight and took a taxi to the Maury Garden Hotel, where MS had made reservations by internet. We had an after-midnight snack and then retired for the night. Our continuing flight to Laos was at 10:30 am. Bangkok Airways is a very nice airline company, with a spectacular inflight magazine that one is tempted to keep. I eagerly loaded film into my older camera and checked the batteries in the digital camera as the plane lifted off from Bangkok. But instead of clear scenery, we rose into a thick haze. One could still see the ground, but photography was out of the question. Later, as we descended into Luang Prabang, the pilot suddenly gunned the engines and we aborted the landing. He circled and then reported that visibility was too poor to land, and that we would circle to see if the weather would change. Change? It was smoky. It didn’t seem that a weather change was likely. Indeed, the pilot made another attempt to land, and chickened out again. We would fly to Vientiane, where Bangkok Airways would treat us to a complimentary lunch, and then transfer us all to Laos Airlines. They had a reputation for flying under all conditions.

Laos Airlines jets are nicely painted, and they must do some maintenance. The co-pilot boarded just ahead of me, and so I asked him about the conditions. “We will land. I’ve been into Luang Prabang twice already today.” Indeed, we blasted right into Luang Prabang. In retrospect, using a pilot who flew into Luang Prabang many times everyday was probably better than a Bangkok Airways pilot. Visibility was low, but one could see the ground. On the other hand, Bangkok Airways canceled their flights to Luang Prabang for the next four days. And our departure flight was on Bangkok Airways. Would we be stuck in Luang Prabang? We considered alternative departure plans, but the weather did finally change after several days of thick haze. The smoke is from burning rice fields at the end of the dry season, not from motor vehicles. The monsoon rains had not yet begun.

We headed for the Sayo Guesthouse, in the old section of Luang Prabang. They had 3 rooms left – the expensive “best room” was \$35/night. This second floor room features a large bed with mosquito netting, 15’ high ceiling with fans, six large windows overlooking the neighborhood, a sitting room with a lovely desk and a single bed, several fine pieces of furniture, and a set-in bathroom. It overlooks the street and a golden temple across the street. The second choice was on the first floor, also looking onto the street, with a large bed and a set of steps up to a loft with a large futon. The third room



... Well, there really was no choice, but I stated “no preference,” so that MS could do the obvious. We took the “expensive” room and thoroughly enjoyed it. We can adjust to luxury if necessary.

The “best room” at the Sayo Guesthouse, overlooking Wat Xieng Muon. This is a restored French colonial mansion.

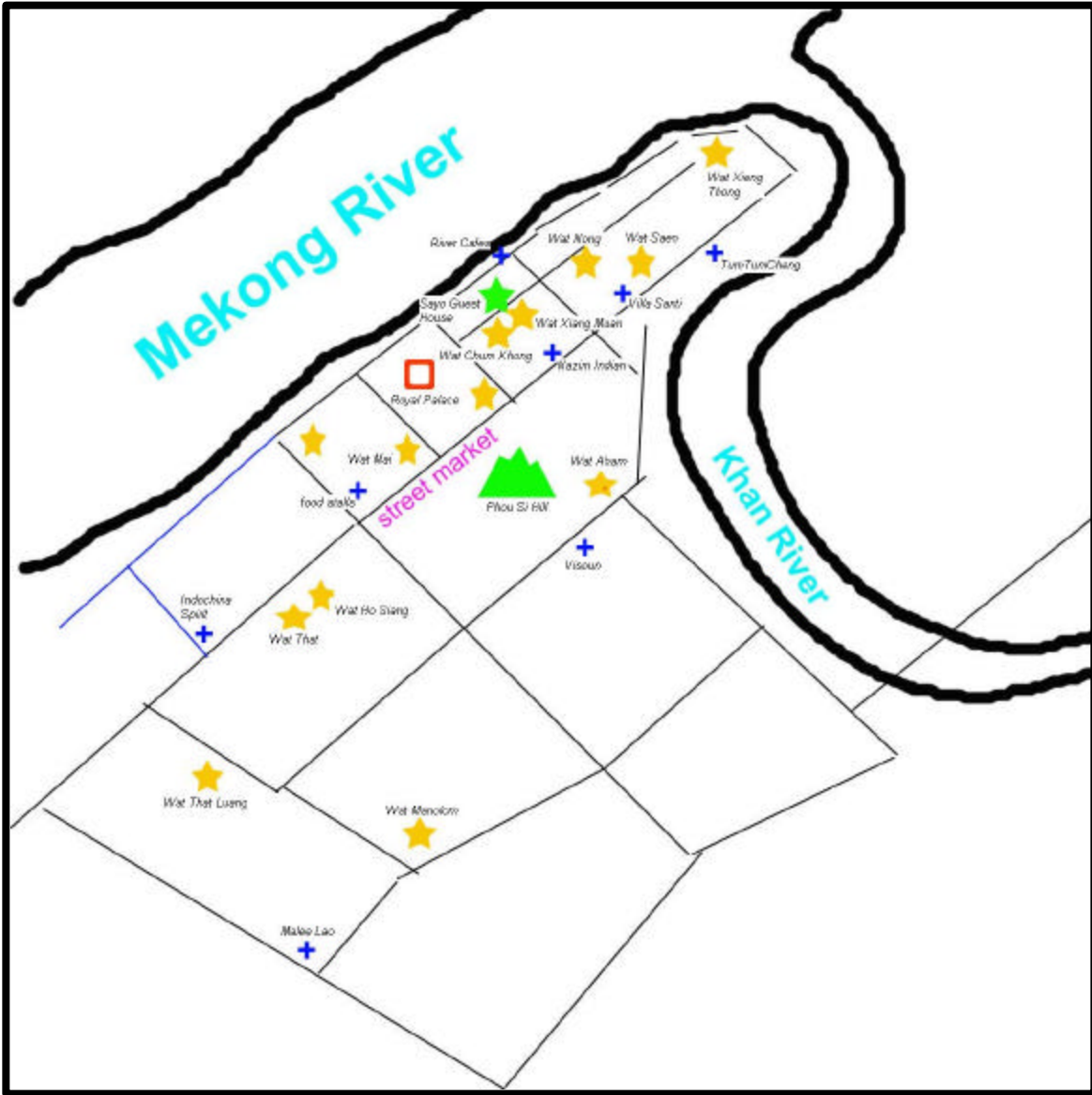
First Stroll

Luang Prabang is officially a World Heritage Site. It was the royal capital of Laos and was not destroyed during the American War of the 1970s. Old French colonial mansions are present, along with many temples and the old Royal Palace. The monarchy ended during the 1970s, but the palace





is preserved as a museum. And the World Heritage Site designation has allowed buildings to be restored and ambience to be preserved. The old district of town is mostly a pedestrian section, with temples, restaurant, internet cafés and tourists. We fit right in. Each evening, the main street turns into an open-air market featuring woven cotton and silk, and carved goods. The last street along the market has open-air food stalls. We had no Lao money, but American dollars work well. We chose a buffet – noodles, curries and a roasted fish on a stick. It was washed down with a good quality Laotian beer. Dinner cost \$5. We chatted with a couple from New Jersey, who were appalled that our visit would only be 6 days. But they were planning to go to another part of the country, or even back to Vietnam, to avoid the haze and heat.

The first dinner: Stir-fried mixed selection and a roasted Mekong River fish on a bamboo stick, with good Laotian beer.





City Map of Luang Prabang

-  Sayo Guest House
-  Royal Palace
-  restaurants tested
-  temples visited

Wat Xieng Thong



First Day

Our sleep schedule is way off, and so the wake-up drumming from the temple across the street at 4 am wasn't too disruptive. But it did nearly knock us out of bed. We couldn't quite see the action, but it was loud. By 5 am, vendors were under our window, motioning me to come down. Were bird watchers so welcome that they were



waiting for me? I got out my binoculars and headed out to see what was around. The vendors wanted me to buy balls of rice wrapped in banana leaves. For the birds? I tried to ignore them and looked for birds in the temple compound across the street. The vendors didn't seem to get it. What was going on?

A begging line of monks walking down the street at dawn. City folk line up each day along the route and offer the monks balls of sticky rice and other food as they pass.

About 6 am, a line of orange-robed monks appeared, walking solemnly down the street. Each was holding a begging bowl.

The vendors now pressed hard as I tried to get my camera out. That could wait. I was handed the food packets, and shown that I should put them in the begging bowls. The monks were silent, and did not smile. The monks passed. The vendors wanted money!! I didn't have much small change, and I wasn't willing to hand over big bills. We settled for about 30,000 Kip (\$3). So much for assisting bird watchers... I decided that I should climb Phou Si Hill, overlooking the old district, to find solitude for bird watching. There was a small fee to enter the grounds, and a couple of girls who thought that I should buy some alms for the Buddha. A few birds were present, but not much. The best, easily, was a Crimson Sunbird, but the others were difficult-to-identify little grey jobs. The haze was thick, and one could barely see across the Mekong River from the top of the hill.

The old royal palace viewed from the top of Phou Si Hill.



I got back to the guesthouse about 8 am. MS had been up and about, and soon appeared. We decided on breakfast, but strolled many blocks before sitting down at a café overlooking the Mekong River. The town is on a bluff overlooking the Mekong River. At this time of year, the water is low, and the bluff is about 30' high. Various boats move up and down the river, but it is no longer the main mode of transport in Laos. MS had an “Asian” breakfast of noodle soup and fruit, while I had a “western” breakfast of a baguette (French influence) and coffee. Hers was better. We planned our week.



Mary-Slater and Jeff enjoying breakfast overlooking the Mekong River.



“Asian” breakfast consisted of a bowl of noodle soup, a selection of tropical fruit, a fruit shake, lemonade, and tea or coffee.



A restored Lao style house in the old district of Luang Prabang. The Lao style houses are mostly two levels, with living quarters on the second level.

Luang Prabang – Around Town – Temples and Monks



Our first stop was the National Museum in the old Royal Palace. It is nice, but the Monarchy is long gone.

Mary-Slater appears behind a golden door at the Wat on the grounds of the Royal Palace.

The real action in Luang Prabang are the temples (Wats) and their monks. Each Wat has a cadre of monks, a few senior monks and a bunch of novices. The novices are mostly teenage boys who are serving 2-5 years. It appears to be an educational opportunity for them. Several approached us to practice their English, and to describe their service. They have internet addresses and are interested in contact. I've had several exchanges since I've returned to the USA.

River boats in a shed at Wat Saen. In mid-April, New Year celebrations involve racing boats on the Mekong River. We were a few weeks too early. I think that each temple has their own team. These boats hold 50 rowers.

The temples are similar to the Thai temples. Indeed, Lao and Thai cultures are not too different. But there is not as much gold as in Thailand. The Lao society is less affluent.





Novice monks polishing golden Buddhas at Wat Nong.



Buddha, alter and murals at Wat Aham

The temple details are good and the murals and carvings first rate. We spent the day visiting the temples in the old district of town. We ended the day at Wat Xieng Thong, known for its excellent mosaics. It had a royal sponsor. We also

arranged to attend the Royal Dance Theatre, set up a boat trip on the Mekong, arranged a hike to nearby outlying villages and signed up for a cooking class.



Alter at Wat Nong

Carved Standing Buddhas in storage at Wat Xieng Thong



WAT XIENG THONG



A small temple in the back of the Wat Xieng Thong compound. These were all richly decorated with mosaics.



Some of the details of the mosaics at Wat Xieng Thong





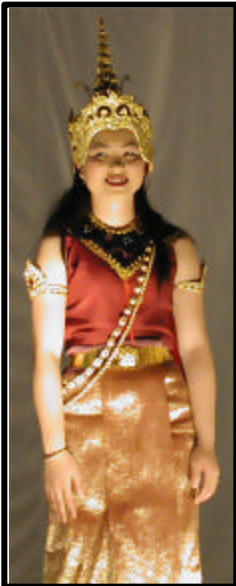
Mosaics – Wat Xieng Thong

The evening of our first full day was spent at the Indochina Spirit restaurant, followed by a traditional dance performance at the Royal Dance Theatre. The restaurant served a variety of Laotian foods including Mekong riverweed and Laotian salad. The riverweed was the most unique. It is a dried sheet of river grass (seaweed) with bits of garlic and dried tomato embedded into the riverweed. The sheet is deep fried and crispy much like Indian papadom, however it is not spicy.

Royal Dance Theatre dancer



The Royal Dance Theatre is on the grounds of the old Royal Palace. We were a bit early as I was hoping to claim a front row seat. But the front rows were reserved for a cultural delegation from Vietnam. And they were a bit late arriving. The show was fun with good costumes.



Royal Dance Theatre dancer taking bows



Geckos gracing the eaves of our hotel