

Travel Grant Report

**Nam Ou River Trip,  
Laos**

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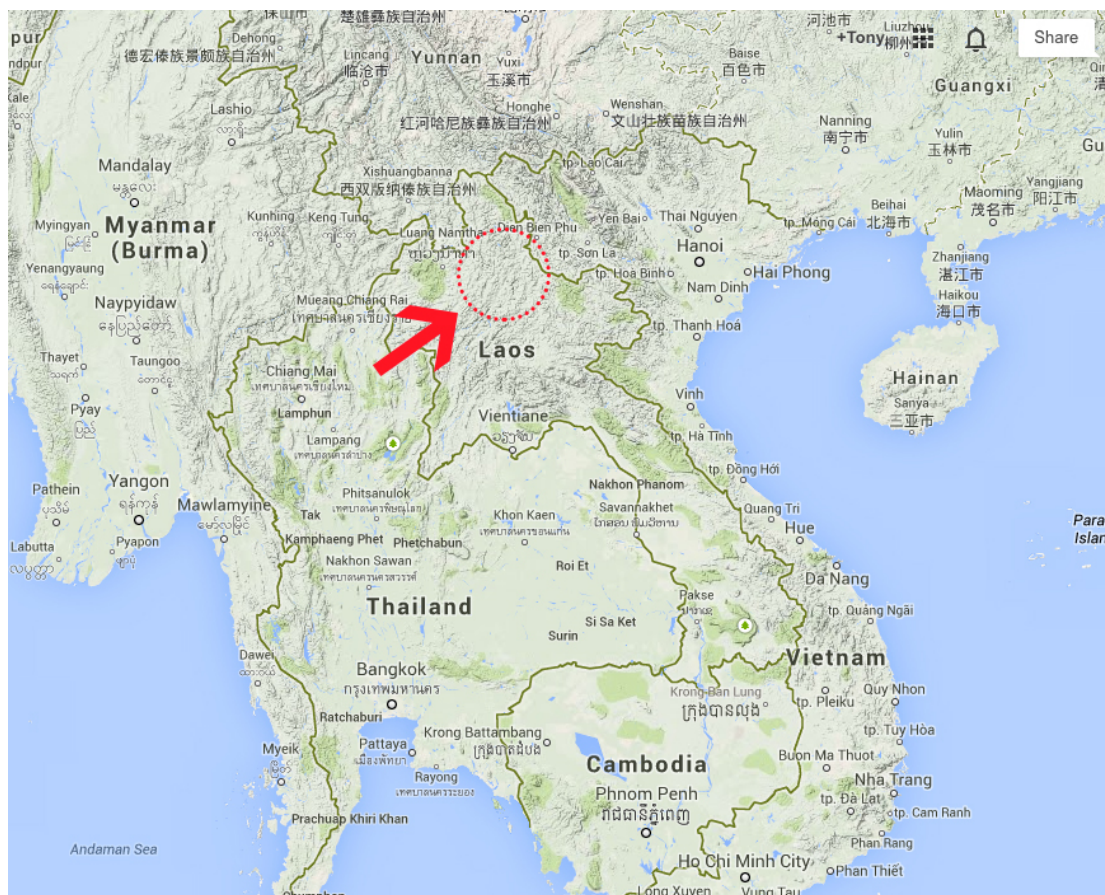
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## Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao P.D.R.) is a landlocked, mountainous country in South East Asia that has been largely insulated from the modern world due to its inaccessible terrain and historically isolationist government. Laos houses watersheds for the Mekong river basin, one of the richest areas of biodiversity in the world, second only to the Amazon.

I am currently stationed in the ancient provincial capital of northern Laos called Luang Prabang, a historic city at the confluence of the Mekong and several other rivers. Having worked here for the last year as an advisor on poverty alleviation projects with the United Nations and German development agency, I have come to observe Laos' exceptional ethnic and cultural diversity. There are over 160 distinctly different ethnic groups in Laos, speaking a total of 82 languages and practicing diverse spiritual and religious beliefs<sup>1</sup>. Many of the more remote ethnic groups have been referred to as 'hill tribes' by outsiders and the dominant ethnic Lao people, and remained relatively uninfluenced by the modern world.



<sup>1</sup> “Ethnologue: Languages of the World” M. Paul Lewis

My objective was to produce a photo documentary of an expedition through a historically significant tributary river of the Mekong called the Nam Ou.

The Nam Ou is a navigable river that runs 448 km from the Chinese border to its entry into the Mekong just north of Luang Prabang. Tourism on the lower parts of the river (near the Mekong confluence) is possible, particularly where there is road access. But reports from Western foreigners who have traveled upstream are scarce.

Traditionally the Nam Ou was a major north-south route linking Luang Prabang and Laos with southern China and the Tai principalities of northwestern Vietnam.

The first French Mekong expedition led by Dougart de Lagree and Francois Garnier (1866-68) was looking for a trade route from their colony in southern Vietnam (particularly Phnom Penh and Saigon) to the interior of China, searching for "Shangri-La" as they passed through Luang Prabang they were told that the Nam Ou is the "golden road" to China (and it was in fact the shortest and easiest way to get to the uplands of Yunnan until roads were built), but due to the Frenchmen's obsession with the Mekong they disregarded that advice and continued up the Mekong which led most of the crew to die from disease and attacks by malevolent Shan hill tribes.

Haw bandits from southern China came marauding down into Laos in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (including the sacking of Luang Prabang which forced the king to seek French protection). Many Haws came down along the Nam Ou, indeed the Siamese had manned cannons as defenses on the limestone cliffs in the gorges south of Muang Ngoi try to drive them off.

Although modern road connectivity with China bypasses the need for using the Nam Ou river for commerce and travel anymore, it still continues to have a strong significance to the Lao people marked by a sacred temple complex containing thousands of Buddha effigies built in a cave at the confluence of the Mekong and the Nam Ou.

In February 2012 the federal government, in cooperation with a hydro-energy firm from China, announced an engineering procurement and construction contract to build four hydroelectric dams on this river by 2016. The construction of dams will undoubtedly transform life and ecology along the banks of the Nam Ou forever. It is my goal to preserve some memory of these highland river tribes before the introduction of electricity, roads and all that comes with development.



This remote area is home to hill people and minority cultures such as the Kh'mu people (indigenous to Lao), the Akha (Sino-Tibetan peoples who migrated to present day Lao approximately 200 years ago), and various tribal 'Tai' groups (mainly 'Black Tai', but also some 'Red Tai' and 'White Tai'). Collectively, the tribes are known as either Lao Soung (highland Laotians) or Lao Theung (upland valley Laotians) depending at which elevation they live at. Many of these tribes are considered endangered.

The river has some of the most stunning scenery in all of Laos, many of the tribal villages on the northern stretches of the Nam Ou are only accessible by boat past the outpost of Nong Kiaw. Sections of it traverse steep karst (limestone) canyons containing hundreds of caves, many of which are considered sacred. Local folklore tells of caves filled with gold Buddha statues and the serpent Nagas who protect them.

Life along the river is simple, local communities subsist on fishing, farming, hunting and gathering, and continue to have only limited interactions with the outside market economy.

## *Travelogue*

The starting point for the expedition on the Nam Ou river was Nong Kiaw, a small sleepy town with one of the few bridges crossing over the river. There I hired a small motorboat and captain who agreed to take my guide and me up river.

Our first stop was the old district capital town of Muang Ngoi which was heavily bombed by the Americans during the Indochina war. Having been essentially leveled during the war, the town has been rebuilt as a tourist destination, attracting a variety of Asian and Western tourists. Although still only accessible by boat, Muang Ngoi is rapidly being developed with electrical infrastructure and road construction.

From Muang Ngoi the next overnight destination was Muang Khoua, a day's ride upstream. This stretch of river is particularly beautiful, as the river passes through a very steep canyon. The communities living along the banks are small and mainly subsistence based. We stopped in a village called Ban SoChem to meet with village elders who proudly showed us a school built by Canadian Missionaries that seemed to be in good use.

Muang Khoua (literally translates to "the right district" because as you come downstream the town is on the right side of the river) was one of the larger bustling towns on the river. Although not a tourist destination, it hosts many travelers, mainly traders from Vietnam and China. In Muang Khoua we were able to purchase some canisters of gasoline and spare parts for the boat (propellers and rudders) for our travel upstream.

Spending the night here, I took the opportunity to go up to the surrounding highlands for 2 days into Akha tribal areas. New dirt roads built by Chinese dam contractors snake up the valley, allowing most of the journey to be accessible by vehicle. The final stretch required about a one hour hike to the Akha village of Pichergao and a further 45 minutes across the mountain ridges to the Akha Bala village of Honglerk.

The highland tribes in the Nam Ou river basin are predominantly Akha. They tend to live at the highest elevations in very primitive living conditions. Homes are built on the ground (as opposed to on stilts) with mud floors, and livestock are not contained in pens or cages, but rather roam freely. The Akha are animist in their beliefs and survive on a combination of hunting/gathering, livestock raising and subsistence farming of yams, cassava, taro and highland rice.

We stayed in the Village Chief's house for meals and sleeping. Although most of the tribe couldn't speak Lao (they have their own tribal language) we were able to communicate through the Chief's family who spoke Lao, and so learned much about



some of the hardships their village faced. The village felt medieval, and although the people were very shy (especially the women), they were hospitable and kind.

Early the next morning, the sun climbing above the morning clouds in the valleys below us, we hiked along the connecting ridge back to the road and then hitchhiked back to the Nam Ou river at Muang Khoua, where we again loaded up the boat and bought some imported fruits for gifts to bring to the more remote villages.

We continued up river for the better part of a day to a tributary of the Nam Ou. Along the way we stopped at various small settlements along the river and observed fishermen and farmers at work. Because the river was in low flow, the fertile banks are used to cultivate herbs and vegetables. In some spots the variation in river depth can fluctuate up to 30 ft, so the banks are substantial during this time of year, and account for a lot of local food production.

For the next leg of our voyage, instead of continuing up the main river, we decided to follow a tributary of the Nam Ou called the Nam Baan. This branch would take us to one of the remotest parts of Laos, totally inaccessible by roads and in an area that doesn't experience much river commerce or logging.

We had to hire a first mate familiar with the river since travel up the Nam Baan is quite dangerous due to rapids and narrow passage in places. The first mate stood in the front of the boat with a long bamboo pole and circumnavigated the boulders as we barreled upstream. At first this experience was quite unnerving, as I've never had to negotiate rapids going against the flow of a river, but after some time it became routine and the crew were incredibly adept at performing these hair-raising maneuvers. At some points the rapids were so bad we had to portage the boat around them.

After a few hours we took a break at the riverside Kh'mu village of Gadtaangsoi. The Kh'mu are the largest ethnic groups in Phongsally province and maintain a special status as the aboriginal people of Laos. I found them to be very outgoing and inquisitive. We toured through their small village and made some necessary adjustments to the boat; replacing the propeller, which had taken a beating on rocks, as the river was getting shallower the further upstream we travelled.

The stretches of river between villages in this area had never been logged and the jungle exhibited intensely vibrant plant life. Awesome trees jut out of the old growth forest on the surrounding mountain ridges. These forests have been lungs of the earth for much longer than the great forests of North America and Europe, the biodiversity here predates the ice age, as the arctic glaciers never touched this part of the world. Due to increased population pressure, skyrocketing demand from China and local poverty and corruption, illegal wildlife hunting has led to a dramatic decline in a number of key wildlife species in recent years.

When we reached the characterless government outpost town of Baak Pae we unloaded the boat for the night and stayed in a basic homestay.

The next day we hiked over a 700M ridge to the 'Black Tai' community of Chabue. My guide knew this community quite well, but hadn't had contact with people there in a few years. Much of the area east of the Nam Ou in Phongsally only received cell phone coverage in 2011, and few people in the area own phones so we were unable to announce our arrival in advance.

The twin hamlets of Chabue Tai and Chabue Neua are located in one of the few upland valleys with a relatively large and fertile plain, which was irrigated for rice growing. We passed some fish ponds and a rudimentary hydroelectric generator made from a propeller attached to a turbine near the entrance of the village. What initially struck me about the layout of Chabue Tai was that every house was serviced with fresh water via elevated bamboo ductwork. There was no evidence of plastic trash or manufactured materials in the houses, as everything was made of local organic materials. The only imported item I saw was a TV in the Village Chief's house. Hooked up to the hydro generator, the TV voltage waxed and waned with the river flow, making it difficult to watch. Nevertheless, the entire family was transfixed by the glamorous Thai actors and actresses on the screen. I distinctly remember how completely alien the culture being portrayed on TV was compared to the one I was spending the night in.

We spent some time getting to know the villagers. Both hamlets were producing textiles from cotton they grow on the hillsides, although demand for handmade textiles has diminished with more accessible synthetic imports being imported from China in the bigger towns. Many villagers have taken to growing coffee for export to Vietnam. They said in the old days, opium was the best cash crop, but that was banned in the 1980's by very strict measures. The Chabue hamlets were surrounded by towering mountains and the scenery was reminiscent of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit". Life in the valley was sustainable, mostly subsistence level agriculture and farming, with some extra income from trading crops, surplus rice, handicrafts and livestock, often in barter arrangements with Akha communities on the surrounding mountaintops. The local people were incredibly hospitable; they seemed happy, witty, spiritual and eager to talk with us. The women, always clad in colorful garments, were entrepreneurial and shared stories of textile products that they made in their free time. The men prepared a deer they had shot with a crossbow and we had quite a feast in the evening, which we washed down with shots of local moonshine infused with flying squirrel liver, something that would surely make us "Kieng Heing" (strong).

Leaving Chabue I noted there didn't seem to be much in the way of schools or electricity, but I wondered how necessary these things were in a place like this. The lifestyle was simple, sustainable, and the people were healthy and happy. I couldn't help thinking that this place was in its own way a kind of Utopian state. That would surely change with the new dam constructions and roads that were imminent. After

Chabue we hiked back to the boat, and then worked our way back to Nong Kiaw. At Nong Kiaw I rested for a few days and then rented a kayak which I took all the way down to the Mekong confluence and then into the provincial capital of Luang Prabang. The return journey seemed much quicker, not only because it was downstream, but because I was musing over the images and memories of the village people I had encountered.

## *Epilogue*

**C**habue was the deepest point into the Northern Uplands region that I attained on this trip. It is certainly one of the most remote parts of the South East Asian peninsula and felt like entering a time machine back to the pre-industrial period. The rugged and inaccessible landscape has kept the indigenous tribes here isolated from most of the world, but that is changing rapidly now.

Most of the communities I visited had already experienced some form of electricity (usually local hydro), and cellphone coverage, but were still largely inaccessible by road. With four major dams on the Nam Ou river slated for development in the coming years and the ensuing road and bridge construction, these communities will either be relocated (as their valleys will be flooded) or will become accessible by road which will bring in foreign workers and the flood of modern consumerism. Just a few months after taking this trip, the Nam Ou river was diverted for construction of the first dam. It is no longer possible to travel by boat between Luang Prabang to Nong Kiaw, and most of the Nam Ou will no longer be navigable.

There are many political controversies surrounding the dam building in Northern Laos, but I tried to remain neutral during this trip and only document a place in time that will soon be lost. I tried several times to gain access to the dam sites but the government would not permit me to enter these areas.

I produced a photo documentary which is meant to accompany this report. I am grateful to the Harvard Travelers Club for supporting this venture, and hope that some good comes of expanding the body of knowledge in this special part of the world.