

On your bike in Vientiane



TEXT & PHOTOS: MARK ANDREWS

YOU WANT TO EXPLORE THE GLORIES OF THE PAST BUT YOU DON'T HAVE A TIME MACHINE — GET A BICYCLE. KS PULLS A WHEELIE IN VIENTIANE, LAOS.

Cycling along the bank of the Mekong we soon left behind the bustle of the city. Not that Vientiane could ever really be described as busy. But here, as asphalt gave way to dirt track, life changed down a gear. Just ten minutes away from the city, it was as if we had entered the countryside.

The capital of Laos is just on the other side of the Mekong from Thailand. Vientiane really should be pronounced as Viang Chan, the international spelling is inherited from the country's former French colonial masters. The name comes from Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism, and means Sandalwood City.

Vientiane has a history of over 1,000 years and first became the capital in 1560 when King Setthathirath of the Lan Xang kingdom changed it from Luang Prabang. However, its location has meant that it has suffered invasions by the Siamese, Burmese and Chinese. When the French made Laos a colony they once again made Vientiane the capital.

Today the population numbers over 200,000. However most tourists congregate in the area concentrated along

the *thanons*, (streets or avenues): Fa Ngum, Setthathirath and Samsenthai.

To visit Vientiane's principal sight you need to travel a little outside the city: Pha That Luang, also a national symbol, is a huge gold-covered structure with a central stupa rising to 45m in height and sitting on a base that is 69m by 68m.

As you enter the site you pass by a statue of King Setthathirath who built the complex over a Khmer temple when he moved the capital to Vientiane. At one time it was surrounded by four *wats* (temples) but today only the ones to the north and south remain. After being built it was damaged by invading Burmese and Siamese. The Siamese invasion of 1828 so badly damaged Vientiane that Pha That Luang was abandoned before being rediscovered by the French.

What you see today is largely the result of efforts by the French in the

1930s to rectify the problems they caused with their earlier 1900 restoration. Surrounded by a high wall cloister for protection, the gold-coloured monument rises three levels. The first level has four small prayer halls and represents



the material world. On the second level are stupas symbolising each of the 30 Buddhist perfections. The final level is meant to symbolise Buddhist enlightenment.

Difficult to miss, Patuxai is Laos's answer to the Arc de Triomphe. Usually countries talk up their tourist sights. Not so here, where the signs introducing the monument speak of it disparagingly and lay the blame squarely with the past regime. It is often jokingly referred to as the vertical runway because the concrete used was originally earmarked for building a new airport. Gaudily decorated with traditional motifs and scenes, it is intended to commemorate those who died in the fight for independence. Unlike the better known French monument, which it resembles from a distance, it has four arches. Climbing through two levels of stalls selling souvenirs you reach the top level and tower which give a good view over low-rise Vientiane.

Other sights in the city consist of the Lao National Museum with its exhibits celebrating the victory of the Pathet Lao and introducing the various ethnic groups and Lao history. There are also plenty of *wats* throughout the city. The oldest and most visited, Si Saket, is just opposite the presidential palace and is a very good example. Nearby is Haw Pha Kaeo which houses the national museum of religious art.

However, one of the best things you can do is hire a bicycle and get away from all the tourist areas. If you want to hire something better than the *mama chari* (10,000 kip/day) I ended up with, get to the shops early. Follow Th Fa Ngum upriver until the main road swings around a corner. If you follow the small lane that continues along the river this soon becomes just a dirt track.

An NGO called the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) have an office a short distance along the track. There is a small area displaying their work clearing unexploded ordnance. Laos was heavily bombed by the US during the Vietnam War to try to cut the North Vietnamese's Ho Chi Minh Trail supply route. Many of the bombs, especially bomblets from cluster weapons, hit soft ground and failed to detonate. Other munitions come from various land battles during the last century as various groups wrestled for power. These unexploded weapons continue to maim and kill hundreds every year.

Once you get by the scattering of guesthouses, restaurants and upmarket homes, things get a lot quieter. The track is punctuated by the odd wooden home, or shack serving as a small restaurant or grocers. Everyone is very friendly; smiling and saying *sabaidii*, 'hello' in Lao. Even the dogs, though, seem lazy in the heat. They half cock their heads as if to say I want to bark at you but it's just too much effort.

We had a late lunch at the upmarket Kong View restaurant which appeared in the middle of nowhere along the track on the banks of the Mekong. Butterflies floated past as we feasted on assorted Lao snacks (38,000 kip), which included Luang Prabang sausage and riverweed, along with vegetables and *cha siu*-style pork. Entertainment came courtesy of four kids with a net trying to fish in the river whilst a more seasoned fisherman pulled his catch from a net into his long boat.

Attracted by a 1952 Oldsmobile a little further down the track I stumbled across P&P Service Centre run by Australian, Peter Calam. In Laos off and on since 1975, he talked of the changes he's seen. Today he earns a living servicing vehicles from all the NGOs who are the lifeblood of Laos.

Further on we looked around Wat Sibounheuang which apart from a few playing kids was deserted in the afternoon heat. Soon afterwards the track veered off and joined the paved road near the airport.

If you are heading back along this route around dusk you should stop off at the Sunset Bar. Whilst it is in the guidebooks, it is mainly frequented by NGO types. Built on stilts from reclaimed boat timbers it is a great place to watch the sun sink over Thailand as children play football on the sandbar below.

One dinner bargain back towards town is Mittapharb Lao Barbeque. For 28,000 kip per person you can dine on meat, fish and vegetables. The BBQ is a cross between Korean and *shabu shabu* with the bottom covered in water but a raised area for barbequing. The other alternative is the roadside stalls selling grilled meat and fish on Th Fa Ngum overlooking the Mekong. When we were there major construction work was being done on the sandbar but this should be finished in the second half of this year.

TIPS

There are no direct flights from Kansai International Airport but you can fly to Bangkok, Hanoi, or Ho Chi Minh City and then catch connecting flights or go overland. The dry season is November to May and is the best time to visit. ¥100 = 9,000 kip (approx).

LINKS

Lao Tourist Board:
www.tourismlaos.org
Kong View restaurant
www.kongview.com
MAG
www.maginternational.org/laopdr