

A kinder, gentler Laos

Laos, now that the American bombers have gone home, is a great place for a quiet holiday, says JAYANT BHANDARI

WHERE IS Laos? the immigration officer at Delhi airport asked. People know very little about Laos: a paradise and yet very light on the pocket. It is still a

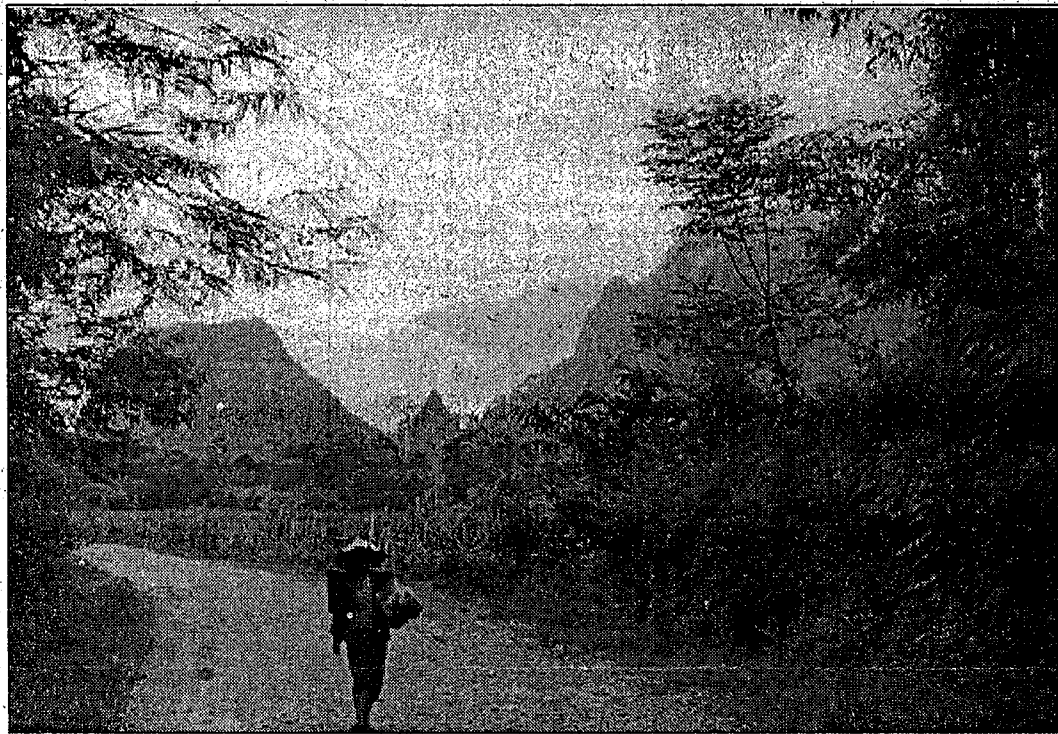
TRAVEL

communist state and relatively isolated and just that makes Laos a cultural haven. More than half of Laos is forested — a treat for nature lovers.

Having seen a lot of the West, I was keen to see a secluded country and also Marxism, before it died out. A friend and I decided to go on a three-week visit to Laos, sandwiched between Vietnam and Thailand and also bordering China, Myanmar and Cambodia.

While the easiest way to reach Vientiane, the capital, is by plane from Bangkok, we took a train. The train reaches the Thai border city of Nong Khai and then, you end up in Vientiane. It was raining heavily.

Soon after leaving Thailand, I spotted areas surrounded by



Vang Vieng in northern Laos: Scenic beauty

The mines and unexploded bombs continue to kill people every day, even now.

We stayed in a government-run hotel in downtown Vientiane. It cost us about Rs 250 a night and it was one of the

Pakistan would be issued visas. This forced me to fly back to laidback Vientiane with its wide roads, the legacy of French colonisation.

From Vientiane, we went north to Vang Vieng where a small girl offered us opium. Around Vang Vieng there are small rivers and some beautiful caves. It is a lovely country but one has to worry about the landmines.

The buses are small and have two flat wooden planks across the sides. The planks are narrow and not very high — functional for a Lao but very tough for tall men. My bus was full of jerrycans of petrol and everyone inside was smoking! Our guide said that it would be stupid to expect to do much long-distance travelling. And that day and every day after that, we only travelled 100 km.

We visited Luang Phabang, a world heritage city on the banks of the Mekong River. Many tourists fall in love with this city and spend all their time here. Then, we stayed three nights in the village of Nong Kkhiaw and for a night in the town of Muang Khua. From there, we took a motorboat to Hat Sa. The river Nam Ou passes through dense

forests and from Hat Sa we took a short bus trip to Phongsali, the northernmost city of Laos. This bus ride was the scariest I have ever had. I was scared we would crash.

I chose to go back to Vientiane by helicopter. But before that, we trekked four days in the mountains north of Phongsali. We trekked further north for two days and then came back via a different route, staying overnight in villages. A hospital, in case we fell ill, was a week away, in Luang Phabang.

During the trek began my close encounter with leeches. Despite my outdoors' life, I had never encountered them before. They must be the most shameless creatures — it is impossible to shake them off. If you pull them off, you bleed and bleed.

In the village, the food was fabulous. We were far away from civilisation as I knew it but the tribals, though not accustomed to non-Lao people, were extremely friendly. Phongsali gets electricity only for four hours in the evening. In the village there was no electricity and to conserve oil, the lamps would be put out early. But there are advantages — in the evenings, I saw the Milky Way in all its

grandeur.

The next day's stop was at another Chinese village. The villagers were some of the most beautiful people I had seen, everyone tall and slim. The women work harder than the men, bringing in water from distant streams in bamboos. We saw children fighting over plastic wrappings we were throwing away. The villagers stared at me while I bathed in the stream — I was too plump for them. They thought I had 'breasts'. Talking of breasts, married women in these villages, bare one of their breasts. And they wanted my companion to follow suit.

In the evenings, there was opium. Most of these very beautiful people have blackened teeth as a result. In the mornings, they drink a strong rice-wine. I tried everything to deter leeches — Odomos, even tooth-paste, but nothing worked. That's when all the money I had helped: I could buy myself a helicopter ride to Vientiane, though changing money from bahts to Kips and then, to US dollars was difficult.

The helicopter ride was eventful. People came from the town and nearby villages just to see the helicopter. The children were all over the helicopter and when it took off, everyone began dancing! A couple of hours later I was in Vientiane. My flight to Bangkok was three days later and I decided to spend time in a resort, developed by an Austrian-German couple.

The people of Laos seem apathetic about work. Just like India! But Laos is a socialist country. Despite the poverty, a lot of money goes to waste. A volunteer with a UN organisation told me that a major part of aid money is spent on expensive cars by the international aid agencies. And yet, Laos has an extremely limited road system.

I saw virtually no violence in Laos, a very poor country, during my trip. Nor were there other problems like bureaucratic officials. I met a Spaniard in Phongsali just before I left. I asked him if he had any problems in Laos. He said, "Nothing is difficult any more. I have travelled in India."

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A Buddhist monastery in Luang Phabang

barbed wire sections. There were instructions I could not clearly read, but it didn't take long to figure out that Laos was the world's most bombed country and the enclosures were full of landmines. In fact, during the Vietnam war, the US bombed Laos as much as it did Vietnam!

more expensive hotels. Thailand issues only single entry visas to Indians. We wanted to travel north and then enter Thailand from there, so I went to the Thai embassy for another single entry visa. The notice at the gate said no citizens of India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and

SNAPSHOT

PRAHLAD MAHATO

Don't

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The statesman