A kinder, gentler Laos

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 communist state and relatively isolated and just that makes Laos as cultural haven. More than half of Laos is forested — a trust 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 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.

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

We stayed in a government-run hotel in downtown Vientiane. It cost us around Rs 250 a night and it was one of the 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 Pakistan would be issued visas. This forced me to fly back to hothead 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 Laos but very tough for tall men. My bus was full of Jersey cows and everyone inside was smoking! Our guide said that it was stupid to expect to do much long-distance travelling. 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 tourist fall in love with the city and spend all their time here. Then, we stayed three nights in the village of Nong Khiew 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 Sense beauty in northern Laos: Scenic beauty.

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 here and the men, bringing in water from distant streams in bamboo. We saw children fighting over plastic wrappings we were throwing away. The villagers stared at us, but while I bathed in the stream — I was too plump for them. They thought I had breast. 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 toothpaste, but nothing worked.

That’s when all the money I had helped. I could buy myself a helicopter ride to Vientiane, through changing money from bats 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 around 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 resort — was very 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 am working here in Laos, a very poor country, during my trip. Nor were there other problems like bureaucratic official(s). I met a Spaniard in Phonsavan, and he asked how I had any problems. I asked him if he had any problems. He said, "Nothing is difficult any more. I have travelled in India.

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