

## Lao Trip January-February 2011

### January 19-21, 2011

Bob's dialogues are in Italics. Mine are in Plain Text

Still recovering from a debilitating monster cough, we set off, with some misgivings, for LAX three hours ahead of my scheduled departure on Thai Airways. Traveling under the weather is not my favorite thing to do, but it had to be done. Arriving early is always my choice, and we were rewarded by virtually no traffic on the way or in the Airport itself. Those of you familiar with LAX, can only wonder at our luck. There was no mob scene at the Bradley International Terminal, so I was able to pull up right in front of the baggage cart racks. The rental price is now a staggering \$5.00, but well worth it considering my cough racked and weakened body, and the number and weight of the baggage I was carrying. (Most of the weight consisted of 20 books I was delivering to Monument Books in Vientiane.) Kissed Gerry goodbye and headed into the terminal. Located the Thai Airways ticket counter, got into line and finally lifting my head, (I tend to walk with my eyes focused on the ground to prevent sudden surprises caused by uneven pavement) saw Prany Sananikhone standing in front of me. Prany, what are you doing here? I was surprised and so was he. He informed me that one of his best friends and classmates was seriously ill and that it had come on suddenly. This was a man who has been doing great things in the present government, and whom I met on my last trip to Laos.

*Traveling with Howie has, in my experience during several trips, had more than its share of coincidences. This one was no different, starting, as it did, with Howie discovering that the person standing in front of him in line at LA airport was an old, close Lao friend, Prany Sananikhone.*



*Laos continues to draw me. It is beyond my understanding of why, even given my history and experience with the place. It does seem that there is some enduring quality that resonates with me there, as no place else. Be that as it may, I found this trip informative and thought provoking as always.*

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Checked in, and waited a long time before I got my wheel chair and finally I was pushed to the gate. The reason for the long delay was a shortage of wheel chairs because there were about 10 flights scheduled for take off at the same time. Bob met me at the boarding area and we had a brief introduction with Prany. It was Prany's sister who treated Bob and I to some really superb Lao meals on our previous trips to Laos. Flight took off on time. The previous trips seemed to have gone much faster than this one, and by the time we got to Bangkok I was suffering. Wheel chair made the 7:00 am arrival a breeze, and we were whisked through the usual immigration and customs formalities without any problems. Said goodbye to Prany, he was scheduled for a Lao Airlines flight to Vientiane later on that afternoon. We got to the Federal Hotel and checked in about 8:30.

Mac Thompson was scheduled to pop round to the hotel about noon to pick up some stuff I was carrying over for him and to brief us on the latest road conditions in Laos. He came on time and Bob and I spent the time getting the latest information on the road situation in Laos and what was happening in Thailand. Mac had just undertaken a minor surgery two days before on his eye, and had come into town to have the Doctor check up on him. All was well. Mac said he had to come back the next day and that we could have lunch together.



From Left to right, Mac, Bob and me having lunch at the Federal.

*Met with Mac Thompson at the Federal hotel upon arrival in Bangkok, an event which has become something of a tradition and which marks the official start to the trip.*

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For dinner we had a wonderful fish and chips across the soi from the Federal called the Manchester United Pub. Then we crashed. I slept soundly and well only waking briefly for my usual rituals during the night.

### January 22<sup>nd</sup>

Awoke refreshed and ready for a planning session with the travel agent. Met Mac at 2:30 and then finished our plans with the travel agent. Our itinerary is now set. We are booked for a minivan ride to the Cambodian border, a hired taxi from there to Siem Riep staying at the Angkor Land Hotel for three nights. Then a Lao Airlines flight to Vientiane via Pakse with reservations at the Mali Nam Phou for 15 days. Finally on the 11<sup>th</sup> a Thai Airways flight to Bangkok to connect with our flight back to LA. No RON in Bangkok on our way home.

Tonight ate again across the soi from the Federal at the Irish Pub and had a fantastic fruit punch drink, followed by shrimp spring rolls and sweet and sour shrimp. Just fantastic! All this in an Irish Pub! The reason for eating so close to the hotel is that my knee is bothering me more than usual, and I am not exactly sure why, plus this confounded cough is debilitating and driving me nuts.

### January 23<sup>rd</sup>

*One objective I had resolved to accomplish was to definitively document certain items of interest (to me at least). Principally, the "then and now" where I tried to match up pictures of things from the 60's and how they look today. Beyond that, I had a number of other areas of interest. The first was to establish conclusively that, yes indeed there were three 7-Eleven's on Soi 11 off Sukumvit in Bangkok. Probably one of the densest groupings of 7-Eleven's there are (I would encourage other researchers to add to the body of data in this regard). Here they are:*



*Despite the gentrification of Soi 11 with new hotels and apartment buildings, it retains its character. The sidewalks are not in the best condition, but, still, far better than those in Vientiane which would give any liability attorney wet dreams. You have to frequently step out into the street to get past the many food carts set up on the sidewalk which do provide a*

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*veritable symphony of scents as you walk by. This is, of course, before you hit the eye-watering cloud of automobile exhaust fumes that seems to have formed a permanent cloud bank along Sukumvit Road itself.*

*Went to the big weekend market at Chatuchak. It is basically just a very large market. Lots of clothes mainly. There was a good turnout by the farangs, but it was definitely a local market. Think a very large WalMart where every associate owns and runs their own piece of the action. Well, ok, that is unthinkable for WalMart I suppose. One thing that did catch my eye, indeed I have made this topic one of concerted interest all through my travels in Southeast Asia, was the cactus (the reader at this point is expected to display a considerable degree of astonishment over this revelation, regardless of how many times I have pointed out in the past that there is, mirabile dictu, cactus over here). One stall was exclusively dedicated to selling cactus plants. A little Asian Desert Botanical Gardens Gift Shop? So it seems.*



*As I was walking through the market, I got some coconut ice cream. They serve it in a half coconut shell, with the coconut meat scraped off into strips and put beneath the ice cream, and also give you a small cup of coconut milk. They provided an assortment of toppings for the ice cream (cashews, peanuts, etc.) but I took mine straight. It was very refreshing.*

*Either Bangkok is enjoying unseasonably cooler weather or I really have gotten acclimated to a hotter climate by living in Arizona. It just didn't seem as uncomfortable here as on previous trips the same time of year. I hear they have monsoons here too (unlike the Arizona "monsoons", which may or may not involve any measurable precipitation).*

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*Bangkok is very modern, fast paced, high tech and all, but people still know how to enjoy the simpler pleasures. The market is next to the good-sized Chatuchak park, which has a nice lake and broad tree shaded areas for people to relax on the grass. Vendors at the entrances make mats available and many people were picnicking or just stretching out and relaxing. One monk had some young boys in tow as they walked through and they all just seemed to be really enjoying themselves. The monk noticed me watching them and just kind of naturally included me in their walk-play, posing everybody for a picture, which I obliged.*



Jet lag caught up with me, as I knew it would, about 3 am this morning and I could not get back to sleep, but this is normal for me, as the same thing has happened on previous trips here. Had an early, about 6 am, complimentary breakfast at the hotel and then back up to the room for calls. Bob is off to the weekend market. Before I left on this trip I purchased a Magic Jack. This is a little device that plugs into a USB port on your computer and acts as a phone. It uses VOIP to make calls, and as long as you have a reasonably good internet connection, either WiFi or Ethernet, the calls are clear. Calling from the hotel or anywhere to anywhere in the U.S. is free, and for a reasonable rate about .02 cents a minute international calls are easily made. The device costs \$65.00 from radio shack and includes one year of prepaid telephoning. Additional years are available for about \$15.00 a year. We were able to call from our hotels in Siem Riep and Laos too.

Spent most of the day getting ready for our trip tomorrow. Had dinner at the German restaurant up the soi from the hotel, sausages and potato salad. Very good, I was stuffed.

The scene on the soi has changed little since our last trip 2 years ago, with this exception, a very tall condo project under construction next to the hotel has been completed, and is now offering space for purchase or rent. It is called The Prime 11 Sukhumvit. All other activity seems just as

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robust as before. On the way in from the airport, across the skyline, we counted over twenty cranes purchased on top of buildings under construction.. I hope there is no real estate bubble here.

### January 24<sup>th</sup>

After a very restless night, up at 5:00am for a 7:30am departure to Siem Riep. All packed up and checked out of the Federal. Van picked us up on time and after a couple of additional stops for more passengers, 10 all told, we were off. Did not seem to be crowded, and baggage fit albeit snugly. Four hours to the Thai/Cambodian border.

Our traveling companions were interesting. Two were headed to Phom Phen by bus and then coming back the same way the very next day to Siem Riep. Go figure. The others were German going to Siem Riep, same as Bob and I.

Just a couple of remarks about our driver. He kept getting calls on his cell phone, lots of them. It is against the law to talk on a cell phone if you are driving in Thailand. I casually asked him what was going on. He replied, "my wives." Turns out he has three, and they all have cell phones. Bob and I kidded him, saying it was a mistake to give them cell phones, and his reply was, "I know." Certainly no place to hide. He is Thai Issan, and had only recently arrived in Bangkok, so we were able to communicate just fine.

*A real highlight of this trip was a visit to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. We had decided to go by vehicle from Bangkok, so I could get a chance to see this part of Thailand and Cambodia. We took a minivan with a widely assorted group of Europeans (German, Norwegians) and Australians. All were on holiday and were in a good mood, which was especially useful at the border crossing. That crossing took a total of 3 hours (had we flown, it would have taken all of 30 seconds) and involved standing in long lines for both Thai and Cambodian officials. We were in a group that was going through so we had to wait for everyone to finish each step before we could proceed on the next. Grueling and hot, but at least at the end of it you get a really beautiful visa for your efforts. Plus lots and lots of rubber stamps (I liked that, but then I am rather easily amused, after all).*

*Between leaving the Thai side and going through Cambodian immigration, there is a duty-free zone. It is also a very gambling-rich zone with 5 or 6 casinos. Since gambling is illegal in both Thailand and Cambodia, this seems to operate as a kind of Southeast Asia Las Vegas/No Mans Land.*

This is where the fun began. We were dropped off at a Cambodian government visa location on the Thai side in Aranyaprathet where a Cambodian official met us to help us fill out the immigration/visa forms. Filling out this paperwork took about 45 minutes, and subsequent to that we were issued the Cambodian visa. Be careful, they got Bob's passport mixed up with another travelers. Then we boarded another van and headed for the Thai/Cambodian border to

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get stamped out of Thailand. Unloaded our baggage into a rickety wooden cart, the official made arrangements to have it delivered to the Cambodian side, and then we proceeded to the Thai immigration office to actually get stamped out of Thailand. This took about an hour because they were short handed. Then we walked about  $\frac{3}{4}$  km. crossing the actual border into Cambodia, then to the Cambodian immigration office to get stamped into the country, in Poipet.



Road that leads to the immigration office to get signed into Cambodia. Bob's Photo

This road we walked on went through the Free Economic Zone, and we counted at least 5 gambling casinos. Then we were funneled into a fairly narrow corridor to await the processing. This exercise took an additional one and a half hours because at first, there was only one clerk,



One of the many gambling casinos in the "enterprise zone." Bob's Photo

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and there were a lot of people. About an hour into this process additional clerks arrived and things speeded up. Getting stamped into Cambodia, we were then stuffed into another bus, after loading our baggage, which surprisingly arrived, and headed to another drop off location about 10 kms east of the border. Here is where we actually got into the taxi that delivered us to the Angkor Land Hotel in Siem Riep. This drive took almost 2 hours. The taxi was right hand drive in a left hand drive country, (probably stolen from Thailand} which was a bit scary. All the roads are paved and in good condition, so rainy season should not be a problem. Total elapsed time from the Federal to the Angkor Land hotel was about 9 hours. Once by land is enough, (I think I said the same thing in 1964 when I made trip by train,) taking the Thai Airways flight to Siem Riep, is the easiest and fastest way to go. Each process took time because they kept us in groups and therefore had to wait for all to emerge. Our Cambodian official made all of the arrangements.

*Once on the Cambodian side, everything seemed to both me and Howie to resemble Laos more closely than Thailand: poorer, less developed - the poor cousin. Very much richer agriculturally than Laos however, with rice fields stretching off to the horizon.*

The landscape on the way to Siem Riep is 99% flat with rice paddies as far as the eye could see. Two hundred kms. of rice fields. The harvest was in, but there was evidence of irrigation and double cropping. There appears to be more rice land under cultivation here in this stretch than in all of Laos. Lots of cattle and water buffalo grazing on the stubble. There are also indications of mechanization. Much of the plowing, harvesting and threshing of the rice crop appears to be done with machines. Many of the small farm tractors were seen. All rice exports are controlled by the government, there are no independent traders. Price is not negotiable, the farmer gets what the government is paying, not what the market price of rice is.

### January 25<sup>th</sup>

When we arrived at the Angkor Land Hotel, the manager helped us arrange the tours we wanted with a guide and driver. We scheduled it for the morning. We had dinner at the hotel which was a mistake, not very good.

*Checked into one of the new hotels in Siem Reap. When we arrived, they sat us down in some comfortable chairs in the lobby and served us cold face towels and a tumbler of cold orange juice before they brought over the registration paperwork to complete. I have never gotten that kind of service at any hotel before. It is a Chinese built hotel and looks to be new. It is really a very nice place. There are a lot of upscale hotels here in Siem Reap, so the competition is heavy.*

*This was my first visit to Angkor. So I had that one-time-only pleasure of seeing something truly fantastic for the very first time. Let me put it this way: I'm "into", like, ruins. Any ruins, actually. For me it's like being able to step out of a time machine and be there years/decades/centuries ago. And among ruins, Angkor is ruins on steroids. I would not have wanted to miss this.*

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This was my second trip to Siem Riep and its treasures. My first adventure there was in 1964, and it was during the time when the United States and The Cambodian Prince Sihanouk were having diplomatic difficulties. We arrived on the same day that the Prince was entertaining the President of the Philippines Diosadado Macapagal and there was no hotel space available. I spent the night sleeping in a barber shop, to be more specific, the barber's chair. Today there are hundreds of hotels, restaurants and places of entertainment. One of which we wanted to try, but did not have the time, is a foot massage establishment. You put your feet in a pool of water and fish nibble on your toes and feet cleaning them and massaging them. It is the unbelievable truth.

After the complementary breakfast at the hotel, which was very good, with many selections we set off. The guests we saw came from many different countries, and it was nice to be in a more international setting. We began our tour walking through the main gate of the Angkor King's residence at Angkor Tomb. The causeway leading to the main gate is lined with Naga, good spirits on the left and bad ones on the right. Through the gate and down a long lane by car to Bayon. This is a complex of many images of Buddha depicting the four faces of the religion, It was started in the late 12th century, and construction continued long after the death of Mahayana Buddhist King Jayavarman VII, the first builder.

Angkor Thom means "Great City." Statues on the left represent good and on the right evil. It was the last and most enduring capital city of the Khmer empire. It was established in the late twelfth century by king Jayavarman VII, and covers an area of 9 km<sup>2</sup>, within which are located several monuments from earlier eras as well as those established by Jayavarman and his successors. At the centre of the city is Jayavarman's state temple, the Bayon, with the other major sites clustered around the Victory Square immediately to the north. Angkor Thom was established as the capital of Jayavarman VII's empire, and was the centre of his massive building program. One inscription found in the city refers to Jayavarman as the groom and the city as his bride.



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Entrance to Angkor Thom

Entrance to Bayon which is the major complex in Angkor Thom. Built in the late 12th century or early 13th century as the official state temple of the Mahayana Buddhist King Jayavarman VII, the Bayon stands at the centre of Jayavarman's capital, Angkor Thom. Following Jayavarman's death, it was modified and augmented by later Hindu and Theravada Buddhist kings in accordance with their own religious preferences. The Bayon's most distinctive feature is the multitude of serene and massive stone faces on the many towers which jut out from the upper terrace and cluster around its central peak.



Entrance to Bayon

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### Faces of Buddha inside Bayon



*Here you can “kiss the Buddha”.*



I gave our guide some photos of Angkor that I had taken in 1964. They show a different Angkor.

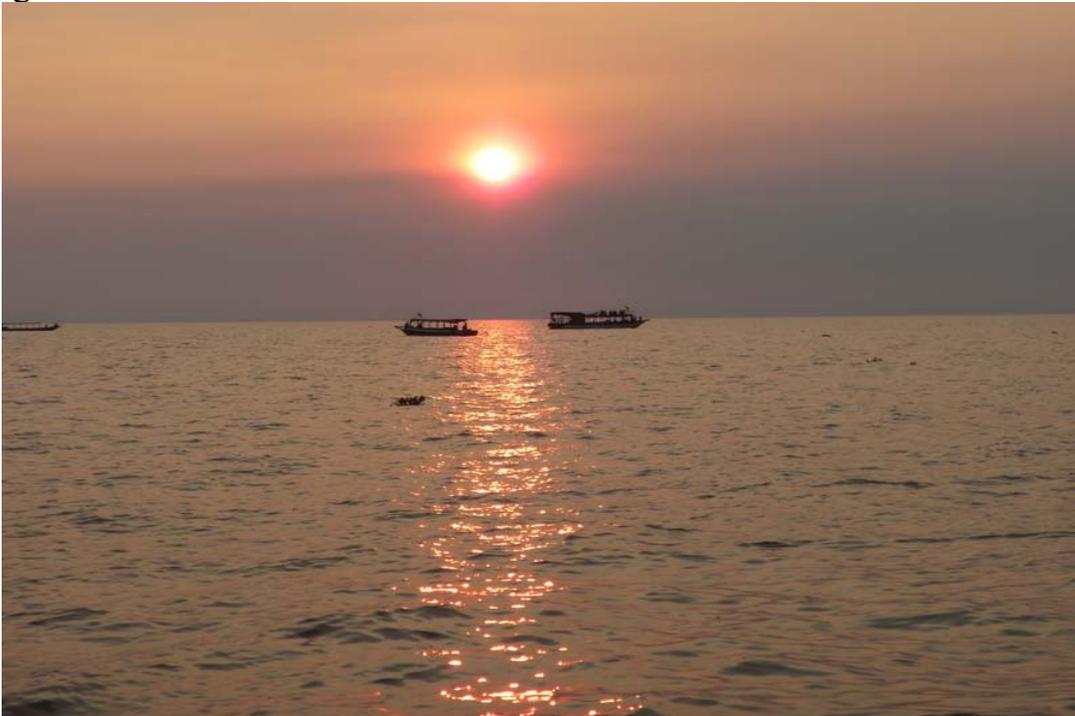
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The Back of Bayon

About 4:30, after a long afternoon rest we headed out to Tong Le Sap for a boat ride on the Lake and a sunset view. We boarded a small boat, a real challenge for me, as it was bouncing up and down, and motored to the lake. Once there we got off of the boat, another challenge, onto a floating platform with tables and chairs.. This “barge” was attached to bamboo logs that kept it afloat. We had something to drink and watched as the sun dipped into the lake. On the way back the boat’s engine seemed to be heating up, so the operator was very careful about his speed.

Tong Le Sap in Cambodian means. "Large Fresh Water River," but more commonly translated as "Great Lake," It is a combined lake and river system of major importance to Cambodia, and the Mekong delta. This is a lake that grows during the rainy season from the inflow of the Mekong River. During the dry season it loses water back to the Mekong. The Tong Lé Sap Lake provides around 50% of the dry season flow to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. It is a huge fishing bonanza for the Cambodian economy, and as the lake level falls crops are planted on it’s fertile sloping banks.



Sunset on the Tong Le Sap

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Then at 7:30 pm. We went to a classical dance and music performance at a very large restaurant. It was an all you could eat smorgasbord and there was not an empty seat in the place. The food was delightful, spring rolls, shrimp, fish of all kinds, noodles, rice, chicken, beef, vegetables it was more than you can possibly taste. I am sure that some tried. Bob and I just wanted hot tea to drink, to soothe our sore throats, and that we could not get. What we did get was, at best luke warm, water, and one leaf for our tea brewing. The crowd was pretty noisy making it difficult to hear the music. It is very similar to Thai and Lao classical dance and music. The stories depicted were from the Ramayana, just the same as the Thai and Lao renditions. Our driver got us back to the hotel by 9:00.



### January 26<sup>th</sup>

In the morning we drove approximately 30 kms north of Angkor to Banteay Srei which was founded about 967. Presently there are numerous very large trees growing on top of and through many of the structures. "Banteay Srei. is a 10th century Cambodian temple dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. Located in the area of Angkor in Cambodia. Banteay Srei is built largely of red sandstone, a medium that lends itself to the elaborate decorative wall carvings which are still observable today. The buildings themselves are miniature in scale, unusually so when measured by the standards of Angkorian construction. These factors have made the temple extremely popular with tourists, and have led to its being widely praised as a "precious gem", or the "jewel of Khmer art."

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Entrance to Bateay Srei showing intricate carvings.

*We had enlisted the services of a guide during our trip and he proved very knowledgeable. He recalled, with some nostalgia, as a boy being able to just go to Angkor and fish in the ponds/moats there unrestricted. He was able to direct us to this carving, which for the life of me looks very much like a stegosaurus dinosaur.*



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An interior view of Banteay

*We spent 2 days at Angkor – time well spent. In some places they have left the vegetation that had invaded and taken over (or reclaimed back to its natural state, depending on your point of view). Wonder what their Homeowners Association HOA said about this one.*



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There are many trees growing on top of the remaining structures.

Some idea of the time required to build this structure and the labor required was revealed to us on the site. We heard a large engine grunting and puffing, and were amazed to see a wire cable embedded with industrial diamonds cutting blocks of the stone, the same kind of stone that was used in the temple's construction. This machine and its operator were able to cut 2 to 3 blocks a day. Imagine then, although it does stretch what is believable, how many workers were required to cut the thousands of blocks needed to build this monument and all of the others in Angkor without the aid of machinery.

In the late afternoon we went to Angkor Wat. It is huge. Bob did the whole tour, I waited outside, because the steps on this monument are practically vertical. "Angkor Wat. is a temple complex at Angkor, Cambodia, built for the king Suryavarman II in the early 12th century as

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his state temple and capital city. As the best-preserved temple at the site, it is the only one to have remained a significant religious centre since its foundation – first Hindu, dedicated to the god Vishnu, then Buddhist. It is the world's largest religious building.”

To say it is magnificent, does not do it justice. The bas relief carvings, the architecture, the engineering, the human effort all combine to make this truly the 8<sup>th</sup> wonder of the world.



Angkor Wat from the front causeway



Rear of Angkor Wat.

### January 27<sup>th</sup>

We left the Angkor Land hotel at 8:00 am and headed for the airport. The Siem Riep airport is a very well designed and efficient place. Our flight with Lao Airlines left on schedule for our first

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stop in Pakse. After entering Laos, we went through immigration and customs, then reboarded our plane and proceeded to Vientiane where we arrived about 2:00pm. Reached the Mali Nam Phou about 2:30. Not much changed in the two years since our last visit. Went to Palamy's, a pharmacy, owned and operated by Prany's sister for a refill of my doctor's prescription of the antibiotic Cephalexin. After a short visit and a cup of fantastic ginger tea, Palamy called a Tuk Tuk and we went back to the Mali. She told the driver that we were her older brothers and to treat us right. We are using this Tuk Tuk entrepreneur exclusively. Great service, comes when you call, give or take 10 minutes, and does not gouge. His name is Phon Savvath Meenolad 2217722 or 55897031 Feeling terrible, cough is back.

*Flew to Vientiane to begin the main leg of the trip. Had dinner the first night with Frank at Sticky Fingers (our favorite restaurant in Vientiane).*

*He mentioned that Wat Si Muang in Vientiane has some old Khmer (i.e., Cambodian) ruins in the back of the Buddhist temple. They don't advertise them, though. It seems they want to downplay the Khmer influence and keep the emphasis on the Buddhist influence.*

*This wat is just opposite the Monument Toy Store where we met with the proprietor to talk about Howie's book and the lecture scheduled for Tuesday night.*



*Met a guy who works for one of the Australian mining companies here as a teacher of English (well, Australian) to the Laos mine workers. He is just back from Australia and was telling some real horror stories of the flooding there. Incredible amount of rain and massive damage. Fortunately, there was little loss of life.*

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I was not feeling very well and looked and felt terrible.

### January 28<sup>th</sup>

After breakfast at the Scandinavian Bakery, best in Vientiane, made contact with Frederick at Monument books, and all is arranged for book talk on February 1<sup>st</sup>. Bob and I went to his office across from Wat Simuang and he showed me what the flyer is going to look like.. Very impressive. He is picking up the books here at the Mali Nam Phou this evening. Last night my left eye started dripping, definitely an infection. This morning, the right as well. Went to Palamy's and got a refill of a prescription for Gentamycin. It should start doing its thing soon.

*While we were there we also got to talk with Ruth, from WIG, Women's International Group who is researching a history of WHO activities in Laos from 1950-1975. IVS had several people working in the area of health back when we were here, but neither of us worked in that area other than building dispensaries, so we were not able to help her much with her research.*

A person named Ruth, from WIG, Women's International Group, who is doing research for WHO, World Health Organization, interviewed Bob and I about what we knew about WHO during our time in Laos. All I remember about them is that they could not carry out their malarial eradication program because they could never get out of town into the areas of malarial infestation. Security was never adequate

This is the reason Bob and I like the Mali Nam Phu. A peaceful environment for reading relaxing, and morning coffee and breakfast. Another incentive: breakfast is complimentary. Additionally, the wifi signal is much stronger out here, albeit not exactly private. Additionally it is a great opportunity to meet other hotel guests.

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Had dinner at Sticky Fingers with Mike Carroll and Charles Alton. They brought us up to speed on many of the events of the past couple of years. I call these discussions “The Sticky Fingers Seminars.” Mike said that the Hmong are planting Cardamom, a spice used throughout the world, but primarily used in India and China, Puer Green Tea, primarily used in China, Galanga Root and the dried flowers, known in the States as ginger, cassava root and corn. Stick Lac, a secretion from insects is collected, and sold. It is used in the manufacture of Shellac. Opium hectareage has increased, primarily because the price of raw opium has risen significantly. Charles feels that the Lao have to use a higher yielding upland rice varieties, because population is growing and a lot of hectareage is going into rubber plantations. Much discussion on the proposed high speed rail network sponsored by the Chinese. I think it would be a good thing. If it is ever built, it would certainly allow for the export of Lao commodities cheaply into the Chinese market, and open additional markets through ports in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

### **January 29<sup>th</sup>**

Spent the whole day in get better mode. Started taking Cephelexin the prescription originally given by Dr. Swift for 7 days. I don't think there was enough in the first dose so we will try another regimen. This time I got two weeks worth. Hope it works. Palamy suggested a cough relief pill, with Codine in it. It really works, so now maybe I can get some sleep without waking up several times during the night to cough. This bug is the worst I think I have ever had.

### **January 30<sup>th</sup>**

Spent most of the day trying to get better. Just slept. Feeling a bit better.

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*I had considered a trip up to Phongsali in the far north this trip, but what with taking the side trip to Angkor Wat and other circumstances ran out of sufficient time to pull it off. Almost took up Mike Carroll's kind offer to hook me up with Doran Butts and Rick Krenzer up in Ou Dom Sai, but I chickened out because of the tight fit for the return trip.*

*So Phongsali will have to wait for another trip. My ultimate goal is to get up the Nam Ou north past Phongsali town/ Hat Sa to the Phou Den Din NBCA. Then go further up the Nam Ou past where the Nam Khang comes in from the right. I read an ornithologist's report where he had gone up the Nam Ou past the Nam Khang to the Houay Yoong where there is a temple ruin. That is really where I'd like go get to, oohing and ahhhhing all along the way, as I really dig original forest and ruins (did I mention I like ruins?). There really is something about the forest that makes it seem like a different world to me. I guess that relates to my earlier time in Laos living in small villages and spending a lot of time in the forest. That's also why it is so disconcerting to see the devastation that logging and expanded agriculture have resulted in. Development – bah, humbug! Except maybe for the odd Starbucks – there was a time I could have used one around. When I was at Angkor Wat and saw the trees growing up through and enveloping the temples, I found myself wanting to cheer for the trees. I could imagine Sunnyvale or Los Angeles being taken over by California Live Oaks.*

*Checking the internet, it does not appear that there are organized tours of the Phou Den Din NBCA area yet. The best prospect I have been able to identify so far is going to the Lao Tourism Office in Phongsali town and making arrangements there for travel up the Nam Ou north of Hat Sa into the Phou Den Din. It also sounds very basic, with few villages up there and no guesthouse facilities, so it may involve some camping. I really don't want to drag camping equipment all the way from the states, so I'm hoping for a way to get what I'll need somewhere along the way. So that's my ultimate plan.*

### **January 31<sup>st</sup>**

Slept most of the day. Felt better.

### **February 1<sup>st</sup>**

Tried to make contact with the wood turner Phone Thip Souvannavong at Houmsinh Handicrafts. Penny, a long time friend who lives Laos, found his shop and we went for a visit. He was not there, but his daughter was. It appears that most of his trained staff were hired away by another shop and he is not doing much business right now. I made my proposal and she will talk to him about it. No telling what the results will be. I will try and call him in a couple of days to find out if he is interested.

Gave my talk at Monument Books tonight. It went well, and there were about 60 people in attendance. Slides were a hit. Lots of good questions after, and we even sold some books. I signed 4, one of which is for one of the staff in the new USAID mission to Laos. Frederick asked me what I planned to do with all of my images. He suggested that they might be of interest to a publisher. He said that he would check out a couple of ideas.

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Signing books after book talk.

Went to Sticky Fingers for dinner, and the dish we craved for, Ribs, was not available so I had to settle for a Smoked Salmon Caesar Salad. Oh, the sacrifices one must make when traveling. They promised us that ribs would be available tomorrow night.

### February 2<sup>nd</sup>

Another day of rest trying to shake off this monster cough and cold. It seems to be getting better, although it is sure taking its sweet time about leaving.

Our next stop was Nui's fruit shake shop on Samsenthai. Without a doubt the best fruit shake I have ever had. We met the South African retiree again, he was there the last time we were here in Laos, an English Mechanical engineer who comes to Laos between jobs and Paul who works for an organization protecting wildlife, more specifically tigers. There was also a young woman, right out of college, I can't remember her name even though she went to my book talk, just in from the States with the Asia Foundation trying to set up a program to train the Lao in the testing of water. I think I got that right. She was only going to be there for a couple of months or less, so what are the realities of success? It seems to me that the money would be better spent in publishing a dictionary of technical terms in Lao.

Went to Sticky Fingers and had those ribs. Fantastic. Afterwards we went to Swensons and treated ourselves to ice cream. I had a banana split, and Bob had a hot fudge Sunday. The real Mc Coys..

*Had a really excellent dinner of barbequed ribs tonight at Sticky Fingers with Charles Alton, a friend of Howie's who is a PhD type in agriculture and economics and who has stayed in Southeast Asia since Howie met him in the '60s. Very interesting guy and good to talk with*

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*about Laos, then and now. He is really up on things here. Also with us at dinner was the economics officer from the US Embassy. Great dinner conversation. Followed by a hot fudge sundae at Swenson's. Howie had a banana split. I think Howie's smile at the prospect of diving into the banana split is even wider than the banana.*



### February 3<sup>rd</sup>

Had breakfast at the hotel, not as good as the Scandinavian Bakery, and took a walk along the newly built Mekong River bank restoration project. It looks very impressive, but I am not sure that it will help prevent flooding or preserve the bank. The banks look at least 100 meters wider than they used to be. This narrowing will speed up the river's flow thereby increasing the cutting force of the river on the rebuilt banks.



River bank improvement with the Done Chan Hotel in the distance.

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Another view of the river bank improvement project showing the river, The Done Chan Hotel and the Statue of King Anouvong The Great.



Done Chan Hotel

*All the food stalls and restaurants that used to be there have disappeared. Maybe they just moved somewhere else.*

In one of the restaurants along the road following the river bank we spotted some unusual looking black rock like things, which looked like pottery or rocks. It turned out to be coal fuel pellets, albeit of an unusual size and shape. They are used in small stoves for cooking and will replace charcoal eventually, because they burn hotter and cleaner and will help preserve what is left of the forest around Vientiane. Still a lot of charcoal being used though.

*On the outside in front of one of the shops along the river, we saw some bags of black cylinders with a series of holes punched all the way through them. We asked and the guy said they were coal (Laos does have coal) and were used in the bucket-sized clay pots that all the sidewalk restaurants and food carts use to cook with. He said that they used to use charcoal, but that they had to go further and further out from town to find the wood to make the charcoal and that coal was easier. Now there's real development.*

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For dinner went to a Thai place on the same street as the Sticky Fingers. Had Tom Yom Koong, Sweet and Sour Pork and Sweet and Sour Shrimp. Delicious. Topped it off with a Banana Split at Swenson's.

### February 4<sup>th</sup>

Today Penny took us to Km 6 to see Kaysone Phomvihane house and memorial museum. It is located in the original American Km 6 housing compound. Kaysone was the leader of the Pathet Lao. Most of the structures that existed then are gone, but a few are still there. Even though I had been there several times, I never realized just how big K-6 was. The American School is totally gone, but a few of the bungalows still exist. After leaving K6 we drove around trying to find the old IVS house complex in Thong Toum. No luck. Then Penny took us to lunch at an Italian place that Bob and I have on our list. Excellent.

*Went out to the former American housing compound at KM6 with a friend of Howie's. When USAID was active here back in the 1960's, it hired some American contractors to come in and essentially build a housing development at KM6 (the name comes from it having been 6 kilometers from Vientiane on the road north). Much of the area has been rebuilt in the intervening 40 years but enough remains to be recognizable to those who were here "in the day." After the revolution in 1975, almost all Americans were booted out of Laos, the Pathet Lao having copped quite the little attitude. So when we left, the Pathet Lao guys who had been hiding in caves and the forest up north quickly took up residence in the newly available housing at KM6. The leader who emerged as president, Kason, established his residence there and stayed there until his death in 1992. Since his death his compound within KM6 has been turned into a national historical site, kind of a Lao Mt. Vernon. We went on a guided tour with a young Lao woman, who filled us in on the details. Howie's friend gave us a parallel rundown of the*

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*buildings we were going through, but from the perspective of which Americans had lived there before the revolution. The kitchen had the original American appliances and was a picture straight out of the 1960s. It was a very obviously American floor plan, albeit adapted for the tropics. The whole neighborhood had a very spacious and relaxed feeling, and resembled much more an American housing tract than any of the Lao/Chinese/Vietnamese neighborhoods elsewhere.*

*I found it interesting that there are saunas here in Laos. You'd think the last thing you would want in Laos would be someplace to get yet more intense heat, but apparently there's an appreciation for the health effects of it. At Kayson's house (a small compound actually within the larger KM6 area) there was a very nice large wooden sauna donated by the Russians.*

*As a national historic site, it has been well maintained. Howie (who had been giving us yet a 3<sup>rd</sup> parallel tour narrative from a – you guessed it – construction engineering perspective) observed how the really solid construction had held up exceedingly well over 40 years. Nearby houses, which had not been similarly maintained, were definitely showing the effects of neglect and the tropical environment.*

Sauna



*We also toured around some of the neighborhoods in Vientiane Howie had lived in. I think I never spent more than 10 days in Vientiane total when I was here back when, so I was no help in identifying old landmarks. But one of the places I did recognize was the old USAID compound. It too is largely changed but still recognizable. Here's the old, then the current.*

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Entrance to USAID compound about 1964

Below is the same view today.



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*Had dinner at a restaurant right on the Mekong*



Tonight Bob and I tried to find a place along the Mekong recommended by a friend, but could not. Just as well, the place we did find was very nice offering a great view of the Mekong, Sunset and bank renewal progress all in one location. I had sweet and sour shrimp and tom yum koong. My friend's directions were a bit vague, changing each time we queried her on just where the place was.

*We had originally been trying to find a different place to watch the sunset, actually, but missed it and wound up getting quite a bouncy tuk-tuk tour of the neighborhood adjacent to the Mekong, which turned out to an adventure in and of itself. Yet another interesting place to get lost in. Just love it. Actually, "getting lost" is one of my favorite strategies for touring a place. To the novice or an anal retentive type (you know who you are), it may just seem as if you are indeed lost, but to the discerning, experienced traveler it is an opportunity for real adventure and discovery. You have swept away for you any notion of what you are about to see, hence you see things without the distorting lens of expectation. Well worth any modest amount of self-imposed anxiety (and sore bum) you may experience.*

*We went there just to watch the sunset (which was as beautiful and serene as I had expected), but after looking at the voluminous menu, we decided to eat there. Had a great meal. I had vegetable and chicken stir fry and papaya salad (spicy, very spicy) and sticky rice. Howie was all happy because we could also watch down in the river where they were doing some construction work filling in part of the Mekong to build and extend the shoreline. Ever the engineer that Howie.*

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### February 5<sup>th</sup>

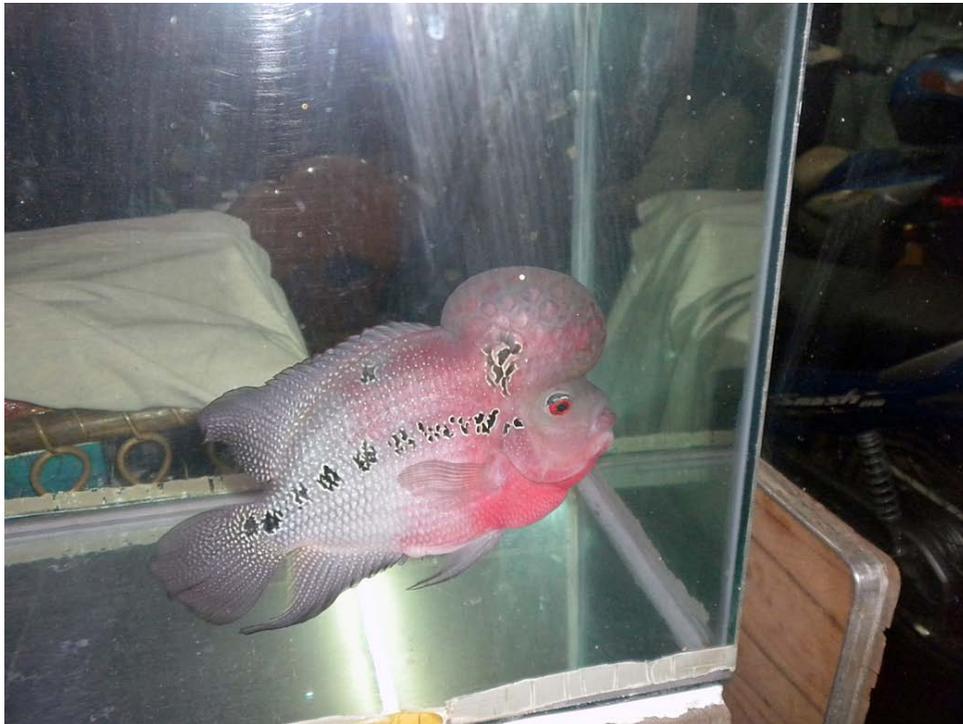
I went to the French Clinic to make sure that my eye was ok and that things were ok. Came and signed up in the early am, and then came back at 11:30. Only had to wait about 15 minutes. French Dr. Cecile Herrmann assured me that all looked ok. Prescribed an inhaler, which she gave me, to help clear up the Bronchial tubes. Told me that if the cough did not clear up within 10 days to get a chest x-ray.

*Went with Howie to the French clinic to get him checked out for a lingering ailment he was suffering from. While we were at the front desk I checked out the service charges: \$US 36 for a doctor consultation. (This is not the co-pay. It was the entire charge!) For an emergency, there was a \$14 surcharge.*

### February 6<sup>th</sup>

We had brunch at the Sticky Fingers, eggs Benedict. Somehow I ended up with four eggs. Met a mining engineer, from the Phonesack Group whose company is looking for coal and gold.

I am still not 100%. Treated Penny to dinner at the Sticky Fingers, for ribs, but they had run out of ribs. They only had enough for one plate, so we kind of split it. Second time they have disappointed us about ribs. Saw Charles Alton and some other new acquaintances. Charles stated that the Lao have to use a better producing hill rice. One variety is available but needs some modification to make it taste better. Charles thinks that the International Rice Institute in the Philippines could do it.



While wandering around on Setthathirath we saw this bizarre fish in one of the shops.

*As I write this I can hear the drums from the Chinese New Year celebration. Their New Year celebration is a multi-day affair and seems to mainly center around home activities, rather than*

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*large scale public celebrations. Since the homes and businesses are frequently collocated, you see a lot of family get togethers staged in the shops. Also, red is the favorite New Year color. A number of the shops selling Chinese dresses have red dresses prominently displayed and they really go all out dressing up the kids in traditional Chinese clothing. There was a traveling team of dragons striking at various places in town.*



Tried to call Frederick at Monument, not in. Tried to call Darryl Gouldstone at Phonesack. No one there. Struck out. Bob went off to the Military Museum. I just napped, and read one of the books I had downloaded into my Kindle from [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). There are over 35,000 books available. I am reading “The Three Musketeers,” by Alexander Dumas. This book, as many of you will remember, is probably the very first “action” movie script and keeps you at the edge of your chair. The first time I read it was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and it surprises me how much I remember. The sequels are just as interesting, a total of five books.

*Went to the Army Museum after having the Sunday brunch special at Sticky Fingers – eggs benedict. Here I am in front of the museum.*

*I had wanted to insert a picture (courtesy of Mac Thompson) of me at a 105 howitzer battery on one of the mountains around Nam Bac circa 1967 for comparison. I haven’t been able to find it in the archives yet, but in going through the museum I was provided a view of the war through the perspective of what we used to refer to as “the bad guys” (well they *\*were\** shooting at us back then). My perspective has changed over the years. Well, not really changed so much as added to. Now it’s more like looking at the events in stereo. And they’re not shooting at us at the moment, which does afford one the luxury of entertaining a more nuanced view of things.*

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*On display outside the museum is a Russian Antonov An-2 biplane (shades of Snoopy and his Sopwith Camel), the same type that was used in one of the more bizarre (even by Lao standards) aerial encounters in the war at Lima Site 85 Phou Pha Ti. One of the few cases in aviation combat history of a helicopter shooting down a fixed wing aircraft.*

*The museum covers Lao military history back from the initial founding of the kingdom of Lan Xang up through the revolution in 1975. They had paintings representing some of the major historical battles. Being charitable here, let's just say that here is a fruitful area for Lao artists*

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*to enhance their artistic skills in depicting historical scenes. They did have some displays of period weapons including simple sharpened bamboo spears and three pointed metal tridents, as well as swords and Lao crossbows. The bamboo spears, in the form of bunji stakes hidden in pits and lightly covered with brush to snare the unwary foot soldier, as well as crossbows, continued in use up through the 1960's.*

*The main emphasis was on the two Indochina wars and there was a lot of national Lao and revolutionary spin on it all. That aside, I found it very interesting to see the war from a Lao perspective (that of the Lao Issara/Pathet Lao). They (their Vietnamese "big brothers" actually, as became apparent at the end when the credits started to roll) had put together a documentary of both wars. It had some good war footage, but some scenes were obviously staged for propaganda purposes. I suppose I shouldn't snivel about crude propaganda – at least it's obvious and you can easily right-click it to activate the mental bullshit filter.*

*In one scene, along the Ho Chi Minh trail, it shows them pulling up one of the sensors we dropped that sent back signals when there was activity in the area so we could BTSOO (Bomb The Snot Out Of) them. Our cunning and crafty engineers had designed these to drop from a dispersing aircraft, then only partially penetrate into the ground, leaving the sensor and antenna portions sticking up. They had also cleverly disguised the above ground parts to look like vegetation, so the locals would not notice. At least for the one they were pulling up in the film, that deception attempt didn't seem to work all that well. In the first place, the symmetrical arrangement of the antenna elements (to maintain the phase relationships so it would radiate uniformly) were completely unnatural. Second, it didn't look anything like any vegetation in this part of the world. Third, to the people who live here in this very non-urban environment who know each and every type of bush, shrub, tree, vine, and flower intimately, they must have stood out like a backpacker in a tuxedo.*

*They had on display a photo reconnaissance drone they had recovered pretty much intact. (Compare with recent Iranian success in this type of endeavor.) This had been captured in the 1980's time frame, when Laos was on the outs with Thailand. Plausible deniability was apparently being practiced, as I could find no identifying markings of any kind on the bird itself. Closer inspection, however, revealed that the optics had been manufactured by a company in Riviera Beach Florida (oops). This caused me to reflect on just how much Laos has been a proving ground/ beta test site for new developments in warfare. Back in my time there, we had seriously introduced the approach of using large scale covert/irregular action (as well as air activity) as an alternative to direct military involvement on the ground. Reminds me of some of our current middle east and Pakistan operations. So using drones in Laos back in the 80's didn't come as any real surprise. Nor did what looked very much like a bottle of lao lao stuffed in the fuselage. A little hiding place for the museum staff to squirrel away their refreshments?*

*I really got absorbed with it all and they had to kick me out when closing time came (happens to me a lot in museums for some reason).*

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### February 7<sup>th</sup>

*Eating breakfast one morning at the Scandanavian bakery (Nam Phu fountain in the background), my attention was drawn to a group sitting at the tables next to me outside. I couldn't identify the language, but from their references to various counties, I gathered that they had done quite a bit of traveling around the world (i.e., were fairly well off). They had an infant with them and, apparently, the grandmother was also part of the group. When the mother started breast feeding the infant right at the table, it struck me as a bit inappropriate, at least in Vientiane. But I just marked it up to cultural differences. After feeding, as is the natural course of things, it came time to change the diaper. Rather than retire to the bathroom, the mother and grandmother decided to take the infant to one of the tables inside the restaurant and change the diaper there. I had to wonder what kind of culture changes diapers on restaurant tables while food is being served. While I couldn't identify the nationality specifically, they were definitely northern European, probably Nordic of some sort. Guess that's ok there or maybe just when you're visiting more backward "primitive" areas.*



Seated at the Scandanavian Bakery, with the Nam Phu in the background.

Beginning to feel better.

### February 8<sup>th</sup>

Got in touch with Frederick and he will pass on information needed to contact potential photo publishers. Spent about an hour talking with Darryl at Phonsack. It is truly a fascinating company/group, eight brothers working together on projects all over the world. They are self-funding the gold mine and the coal mine without any outside aid needed. They are actually mining the gold, producing bars, and expect full production by mid-year. Capitalism?

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Talked with Phonethip Souvannavong, the wood turner and director of Houmsinh Handicrafts. He is coming to the Mali tomorrow about 10:00 to pick Bob and I up.

*I was successful in finding the Buddha statue I wanted. It has the “calling for rain” mudra pose, which is unique to Laos. I thought it would be very appropriate for Arizona and it now adorns my desk. After diligently searching through several shops and stalls I found it. It was made in Laos prior to the '75 revolution and they are heavily restricted on how many they can make now. The one I got is carved and painted wood. Turns out that metal ones are not allowed out of the country. They are sensitive to actual artifacts leaving the country.*

*The Lao lady who runs the shop I got it at, right on the Nam Phu fountain circle, had been a nurse for Operation Brotherhood back at the time I was here. Operation Brotherhood was a program sponsored by USAID where medical people from the Philippines were brought to Laos to provide medical services and also to train Lao, one of whom was this lady. Very nice and friendly. Of course I did have to bargain with her (but not too strenuously – fits in with the Lao way of doing things).*



*We have been talking with a guy from South Africa, at the fruit shake shop, who lives here now. We have adopted it as our favorite shake place. He filled me in on the history of the lady who, along with her daughter, owns and operates the shop. Turns out she had been a senior non-commissioned officer in the Pathet Lao during the war and her uncle had a good deal of responsibility for the area of the Ho Chi Minh trail east of Thakek and Savannakhet. When the war was over, as a reward for her service (she is also a member of “the Party” the communist party in Laos), the government set her up in one of the vacated shops which is now the shake*

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*shop. Being on Samsenthai road in the heart of the city is indeed a very desirable location, so that was quite a benefit. Her daughter, who works the day-to-day operation of the shop, has quite good English.*

*When I went there one day, she was reading a book. I asked her in English what she was reading and it was *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. I asked how she liked it and she said she had read some other books by the same author and liked him. Not exactly the picture of a shake shop worker in a sleepy, backward little Asian country, is it? Howie's take was that since (a) a lot of Americans and Europeans stop in there and just blather about all sorts of subjects, oblivious to anyone listening or paying attention or even understanding what they are saying, (b) the daughter seems to have better English language skills than most US college graduates today, and (c) the family is Party, that maybe, just maybe they provide a resource to the government here for keeping up with the latest buzz among American/European types in Vientiane or traveling through. Sounds right to me.*



Right next to the shake shop is a sandwich place that will make up any you want, tuna fish, pork, chicken, salami, cheese all on a fresh French Baguette. There is a wine store that offers a wide variety of libations. Up and down Samsenthai there are many shops that cater to tourists, and most recently new gold shops, and jewelry stores. Their inventories are staggering. There is a sundries store like a 7 Eleven and further down on the next corner you can find orange juice, prune juice, dried prunes, almonds, cookies and a plethora of other goodies.

*I was able to get most of the pictures I wanted to take to compare then/now Vientiane and also do a series on "modern" Vientiane.*

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*Here's the Patuxai Monument and old National Assembly building.*



*Samsenthai Road, downtown.*



*Looking the other way.*



*The Nam Phu fountain*



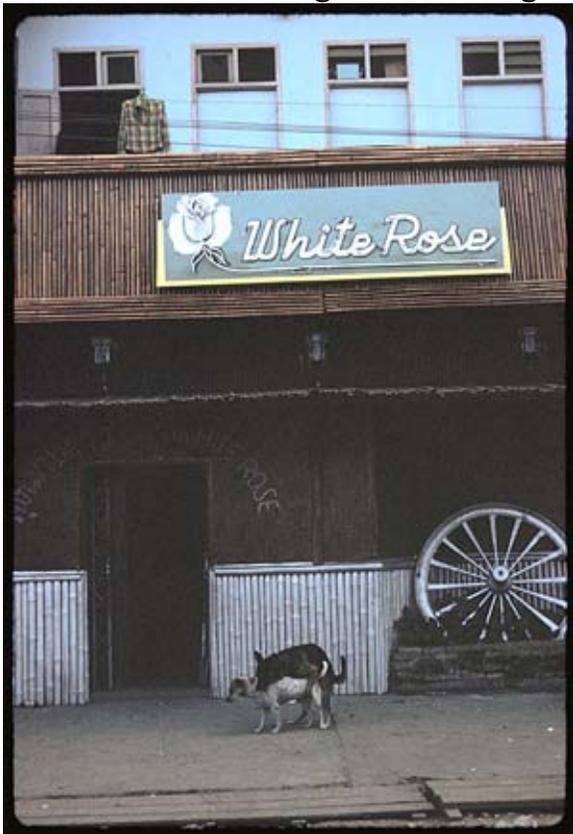
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*The Lao American Association (then) and the Vietnam Cultural Center (now)*



*Pressing on with the theme of “old and new”. One of the more well-known, not to say notorious emporiums of entertainment back when was called the White Rose. (Note dogs).*

The symbolism of the two dogs cannot be ignored, after all that is what was going on inside.



*Today it looks like this. A bit more sedate now and I am informed that the building will be taken over by the Ministry of Education. Glad to see that it will, in a fashion, carry on its long standing mission of expanding horizons for those eager to explore advanced knowledge and experience. Whatever happened to the old dogs hanging around in front? They're still there.*

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*Another feature of the Vientiane scene today is that they have lots more banks now than they had opium dens back then. This may seem a bit mysterious, since there's as much opium as there was and still no money. But whenever did banks let lack of money stop them?*



### February 9<sup>th</sup>

*We went to the woodworking shop we had visited on prior trips. Howie was interested in helping out as a result of our trip last time. Howie had been most upset at the cutting tools they were using – a sharpened piece of steel rebar (gasp !).*

Phonethip came to pick us up on schedule. I demonstrated the tools and we talked about techniques. He was impressed. On the way back to the Mali Nam Phou, he asked if it would be

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all right to stop at a machinist he knew for an estimate on the cost to make the tools. They would be prohibitively high because only making one or two. Also the possibility of making a lathe is in the works. I will send photos and sketches so that he can get going on that. I purchased two small bowls made of Mai Galeum, Lao Ebony. The wood is beautiful.

Re-bar ground to a point and used as a scraping tool. Very dangerous.



Howie demonstrating the use of a gouge to shape an ebony bowl. Bob's Photos



*He had brought along some of his woodturning tools from his own shop and put on a demonstration for the owner and one of the employees there.*

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Close up of tool technique.



Hands on demo of the tool.

*They caught on right away about how much better it was than the crude tools they were using. (I mean, sharpened steel rebar as a gouge! Really? Really.) Howie is thinking how he may be able to return back for a more extended period of time to really do some training classes with them here. Seems like the perfect arrangement after seeing how completely in his element Howie was doing the demonstration today. Think about it: Howie, Laos, and woodturning. What a perfect combination. If they started a smoked salmon factory (Lao Lox Inc.?) in Vientiane, he'd \*never\* leave the place.*

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### February 10<sup>th</sup>

After breakfast Bob and I went over to Carol Cassidy's and purchased a few Lao Silk scarves. I got Gerry a beautiful blue silk one. Then we went to a jewelry store on Samsenthai and I got Gerry a very stunning pair of gold earrings with a Jade pendant and a white Sapphire.

In the afternoon I went over to the Seta Palace Hotel and purchased two very beautiful small silver bowls and a small wooden box. Had a long conversation with an American couple making the circle tour. It was their first time in Laos, and were only in country for two days. I suggested they head for the river and walk along its bank. Then head over to Carol Cassidy's for some Lao Silk. I also suggested a couple of restaurants.

We had our last dinner of this trip at the Moon The Night Restaurant on the banks of the Mekong. Watched the sun set and had Tom Yung Koong and spring rolls. Excellent. Progress was being made on the river bank improvement. There were only two other farangs in the place. When the bill came, I thought that the waiter had made a mistake. It was only 80,000 kip. That is ten dollars, for both of us! When we left and entered the parking area, looking for our tuk tuk, we were amazed by what we saw in there. A yellow Corvette, two Lexus SUV's, and a host of other new cars from beamers to Mercedes. Somebody's making a lot of money.

*Walking out of the restaurant, I got a real shock: there in the parking lot (dirt, of course) was a Corvette. Now, that may not sound particularly unusual to most folks in the States, but it definitely was in Laos. That was the first one I have even seen there. It was as much out of place there as, say, finding an elephant in a parking spot outside a restaurant in Phoenix. Jolting experience, I can tell you. And I didn't even know that Corvette made a 4-wheel drive version*

### February 11<sup>th</sup>

*From all this, one might be justified in concluding I'm more than a bit nostalgic for the "old" Laos. Fortunately, there's a lot that hasn't changed very much at all. Since we spent this trip pretty much just in Vientiane I did miss getting "out into the countryside" (or "into the real Laos" depending on your point of view). So I was really blown away as I was walking down Lan Xang boulevard and turned in to check a wat along it. Instantly I was transported back to "old Laos" – the tall trees and quiet serenity of the forest that the temple compound was able to preserve for us from the more toxic blandishments of modernity. Really, it was like being in another place and time. So I did manage to get my little walk in the forest after all. The wat itself is a fine example of the architecture. Interesting how spiritual/religious edifices (Lao wats, Angkor Wat, European cathedrals) seem to be able to sustain not only spiritual values and practices, but also cultural ones as well – architecture, language, natural beauty – the soul of a place.*

*The first time I left Laos was in 1968 and, at that time, had no particular interest in returning. Every time now though, including this trip, I can't wait to go back again. Guess I always will.*

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Left Vientiane via Thai Airways on schedule. Flight was full and total time was 1 hour to Bangkok. As I write this, we are now in Thai airways transfer lounge at Suvarnabhumi Airport for three hours awaiting our connecting flight to Los Angeles which is scheduled for a 7:30 pm departure. Our luggage was checked through to LA from Vientiane.

In the duty free area Bob discovered a shop selling some ginger root tea, very similar to the tea Palamy gave us, when we first arrived, which really eased and soothed our sore throats. I bought some to take home. Flight took off pretty much on time and we arrived in L.A. in the early evening. Got into a cab and arrived home in about 15 minutes where Gerry greeted us and in typical British tradition, asked us if we would like a cup of tea. We had some of the ginger root tea which I had purchased not more that 20 hours earlier in Bangkok.

More photos at

<https://photos.google.com/album/AF1QipPVcZX3tFpMDVwEXD8rsbj8ahnja8s9PT7t2Bs>