

## Elephant Adventures in Laos

February 12 - 22, 2013

I cried today. Not cute little baby tears, but big elephant-size tears just short of the ugly cry. I arrived at Sophoun/Dien Bien Phu, the Lao/Vietnam border point to be handed over from one guide to another.

The last nine days have been absolutely perfect. Sure there were some teeny blips, usually involving too many people at the same place at the same time, but the organization and planning by Mr. Ley at Lao Travel Service ([www.laotravelservice.laopdr.com](http://www.laotravelservice.laopdr.com)) in Vientiane, Laos and delivered by Khamseng, guide extraordinaire and his trusty companion, our driver, Kon, has been unsurpassed.

From the moment Khamseng met me at the waters edge (there was no dock!) when I crossed the Mekong from northern Thailand to Laos, until the handover at the Vietnam border point at the top of a mountain, we experienced nine days full of excitement and wonder and saw places and events that were a photographers dream.

I still want to tell you about the day at Bumrungrad Hospital - that will come in another email soon - I promise!. I enjoyed my three days in Bangkok after the Burma trip. Rat and her family invited me to join them for their Chinese New Years dinner. We ate at a wonderful restaurant by the river and had unique and delicious dishes. I had no idea what some of them were, but enjoyed every bite. Later, Rat's daughter (a computer programmer) set up skype on my laptop and taught me how to use it, thus introducing me to a whole new world of communication.

Early the next day, Nik (Rat's husband, also a driver) took me to Duang Muang airport for my domestic flight to Chiang Rai. Upon check in, I got the surprise of my life. I had prepaid for 35kg of luggage - it cost very little if you do it beforehand on the web. But I was 8kg (about 17 lbs over) and had to pay the penalty rate. Those 17 lbs. cost \$110, which was \$40 over what my plane ticket cost!

The main activity of the day was to drive 3 hours north of Chiang Rai to Chiangkong -- the border station for crossing from Thailand into Laos. Along the way I asked the transfer agent and driver to stop at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp where I trained as a mahout (elephant driver) to visit the new eles! The program has grown so much and has won numerous eco-awards. They now have 23 elephants - many of them rescued. In addition to Sophie, John Robert's assistant who was gracious enough to spend time with me, I met Carol Stevenson, whose website - [www.elephantphotographer.com](http://www.elephantphotographer.com) - has long been one of my favorites. She has just finished a documentary on Thailand's elephants and is spending a few weeks photographing the Anantara pachyderms.

I Can See Laos From My window!

I spent the night at the Teak Garden Hotel in a bungalow at the water's edge. From its floor-to-ceiling windows, I could see the twinkling lights of Laos across the Mekong River. Anh, a hotel employee was delegated by the transfer agent to help me make the crossing. The Thai border checkpoint is just a 5 min. golf-cart ride away from the hotel. Lines were long, but Anh, knowing how the system works pulled me out of the queue after about 30 minutes and put me in front of a building with a closed window. This was Checkpoint #2 which opens an hour after Checkpoint #1 - and I was first in line. Then he quickly ran and bought the ticket for the small boat to cross the river (40 baht - about \$1.25) and after I had been stamped out of Thailand, I was rushed down the muddy embankment and got into a boat along with three other people - one of whom had more luggage than I did. What! You're not going with me????? Who's going to help me on the other side?????? I was now on my own.

"Hello Mrs. Perica, good to see you again" Right there, at the water's edge, his feet in the mud, was Khamseng. What a welcome sight! He guided me two years ago when I visited Laos to see the Plain of Jars. I was so impressed with his guiding, his interest in making sure his clients see and do everything they want, that I requested him again. It was a good move.

After completing border formalities, we had some errands to run -- the bank to buy Lao kip (rate 8,000kip to \$1 USD) and getting a sim card for my GSM phone so I could call Joe. Then a 10 minute truck ride (remember I told you I had luggage).

## Cruising Down The River

When Mr. Ley wrote I would have a two day “slow boat trip” down the Mekong to Luang Prabang I had no idea what to expect. I never guessed this -- a 114 foot teak and mahogany boat with its own house at the back for the captain and his wife, and a public area with comfortable seating and dining for 16 people, but has held as many as 25. There was room for two sofas, 8 tables with chairs, a coffee/tea/drinks bar and a buffet table. Carved wood decorated the sides and ceiling. I could sit anywhere I wanted! I quickly made a little nest at a table with facing chairs, and settled in to enjoy the ride. I wish I had better photography equipment as the scenery was spectacular.



We passed lots of small villages and fishermen on the river trip.

I spent two days on this boat enjoying every minute. Khamseng being the excellent guide that he is pointed out everything -- people panning for gold at the waters edge, fishermen, hidden villages - most with about 10 bamboo or wood houses cascading down the hillside. Small waterfalls are everywhere and the rock formations are exquisite. We were always surrounded by butterflies and birds. We talked about the agriculture we passed as well as the plants and trees. I learned that Khamseng has a keen interest in geology and wants to get into mining!

Lunch on board. Notice Joe’s photo -- he was with me in spirit all the way.







Boats stop at Pakbeng, a nothing town, for the night. This waterside village has turned into a clutch of guesthouses, small restaurants and some hotels - the kind of places that are OK for one night.

This is my boat -- all of it. The section in the back is the family quarters while I had the rest to roll around in!

Like Cleopatra entering Alexandria on her golden barge, I entered Luang Prabang on my sleek, beautifully crafted boat, alighted and was introduced to Kon, who would be our driver. Then I was ushered into a big, fat SUV which had plenty of room for us, all the luggage for three people, a case of bottled water -- with a whole row of seats left over.

### Why Am I Here?

My goal on this trip was to visit the Elephant Festival held in Sayaboury, a neighboring province. ElefantAsia, a charity dedicated to the conservation of elephants in Laos ran it for several years. But it has gotten so big (100,000+ people), it is now run by the government. Governments being what they are changed the date of the main ceremony at the last minute! (Why? Because then can!) So this necessitated a change in my dates too.

Bottom line -- I was able to spend two consecutive days in Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage City and I stayed at the beautiful Villa Santi Hotel, a former prince's palace. Regrettably I wouldn't be able to stay at this same hotel upon my return to Luang Prabang as they were fully booked, but Suk, the main receptionist, let me leave most of my luggage in their storage room.

Its Going To Be a Bumpy Ride!

We had been warned to leave for Sayaboury early as most of the road was under construction and also to get to the hotel. The whole city was terribly overbooked so better to check in and secure the room as early as possible. It was four hours of driving thru construction, rocks, detours and lots of dust. I was impressed with Kon -- he is the calmest driver I have ever met. In addition to road conditions already mentioned, he had to dodge chickens, dogs, cows, water buffalo and piglets as well as motorbikes, trucks, busses and people walking along the sides. He never uttered a swear word, honked his horn, or hit any of the small animals, he kept his eyes firmly on the road.



| There are all kinds of ways to get to the festival!  
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## The Festival

I could tell we were getting close. Lots of people walking and the streets crowded with busses and trucks filled to over-capacity all going in the same direction we were. And there at a bend in the road and near the daily market spread acres of booths, parade grounds, crowds and traffic.

Do not think of attending this festival unless you can speak and read Lao or have your own personal guide to help you! There is absolutely nothing written down in English and there are no flyers (in any language) telling you when or where the events are. Khamseng and Kon had to put all their detective powers into place to ask, ask, ask people - mostly policemen or army security ..... what time? where? what?

They call them “processions”, but we consider them parades. There would be several, each with different groups, and always including elephants. Our first “procession” was a practice for the main event, two days hence. There were dancers, school groups, and tribal groups doing their native dances along with percussion bands. Some groups were in costume, but it wasn’t required at this event. Then the elephants -- I stopped counting at 75! The stage was set for dignitaries and there was VIP seating next to it. The 99.9% of the rest of us stood along the sidelines, sometimes 3 and 4 deep all angling to get a good view.

Afterwards, Khamseng and I walked around the booths looking at all the things for sale. Though there were a few T-shirt booths (mostly small Lao-lady and childrens sizes), a few souvenir booths, most of the things for sale were clothing, knock-off designer goods, knick-knacks and food. It is easy to tell this is still a local festival not only for the kinds of goods being sold, but I only saw about 15 other foreigners.



As we walked around, Khamseng noticed some activity at the parade grounds. He made some inquiries. Another procession! And apparently no one knew about it as there were very few spectators so he sat me down in the front row of the VIP section and I was the only one there. It was like a private parade!! Afterwards, as it was getting so hot, I returned to the hotel for a few hours with Khamseng and Kon offering to pick me up again at 5pm.

By the time they returned for me, they had found out there would be another procession starting after a soccer game and it would start at the soccer field. Off we went and, yes, there were about 10 elephants already there. He asked around, found out the route and like we all do for the 4th of July parade, quickly staked out our spots. Little by little, we noticed parade participants gathering. Finally it began, another little-attended parade. I think the participants were so grateful for spectators that no one minded when I got in close to take photos. It was about half as long as the main parade and still a lot of fun.

Evenings there were “concerts” on the festival grounds that were so loud I could hear them at my hotel 2 km away! I didn’t go back for evening activities as they



centered on food and drink and I thought this was good time off for Khamseng and Kon.



Finally the big event - the main procession. The Prime Minister was in attendance (in fact he and his entourage stayed at my hotel -- no wonder there was so much security!). And for sure, all 100,000+ people were there with no place to sit. Khamseng deftly moved me thru the crowd and to the shadiest spot we could find which was near the VIP section. Amazingly he found me a chair. More amazingly, he set it down in the first row \*next\* to the VIP section.—

Elephants bow to the dignitaries

-Soon other chairs appeared and I found myself sitting amongst event committee members who (thankfully) were interested in how I knew about the festival, where I came from, etc. They were so nice. When the goodie bags were passed out - I was given one; when bottles of cold water were distributed, I was included. I sat next to Mr. Nousay who had worked on the committee for two years and took it upon himself to tell me about the groups, who was speaking (there were opening speeches) and what they were saying. What a guy! And when the TV news crew came by, he pointed to me to be interviewed.

Then the parade. The groups were dressed magnificently, there were dancers, acrobats, men on stilts, tribal groups in their native dress, sports teams, colorful banners, music and then..... the



beautifully decorated elephants with their mahouts in spiffy matching red and black attire. Each elephant sported a dignitary in a howdah - holding a umbrella which matched the decor of the elephant. Magnificent!

As soon as the last elephant went past, it was time for us to go. There was still the Baci ceremony, where elephants are blessed and given sugarcane and crunchy stuff to eat, but Kon had warned us that there would be a back-up at the car-ferry for the 10min. river crossing (good news -- a bridge is under construction). Khamseng said that last time he was here, it was a 6 hour wait to cross! So off we went back on the dusty, rocky, unfinished road. As it turned out we were able to make the first ferry so we reached Luang Prabang in just over 3 hours.

Nice Place You've Got Here..... Or How I Ended Up in the Prince's Bedroom

Since the Villa Santi Hotel was fully booked, I was to stay at a small hotel not far away. It would be only for one night as the next morning we would start our two day ride to the border.

Thankfully Suk was at the reception desk when we arrived at the Villa Santi to pick up my stored luggage. Just on a whim I asked if there had been any cancellations. He smiled and said "the Royal Suite is available." It was gorgeous - huge, beautifully furnished, magnificent bathroom with claw-foot tub, floral arrangements and even a fruit basket. And guess what, a "special rate" was offered. So I spent my last night in lovely Luang Prabang in probably the most beautiful suite in town. Sometimes the universe smiles at you and says "yes you can."

And finally.....

Next time I plan a trip like this, I'm going to look at a topographic map. It is two days of hard mountain driving to the Lao/Vietnam border which is at the top of a mountain. The scenery is lush and beautiful, the villages small and neat and the more remote we were, the more tribal peoples we saw. (it was also two \*more\* days of mountain driving after I entered Vietnam - more about this in the next email)

We did a lot of talking during this time - even Kon. When I commented how calm he always appeared I learned that he is a former Buddhist monk! This explains a lot and led to some wonderful discussions about Buddhism, reincarnation, and future lives. It was a very zen experience traveling through this exquisite scenery talking about religion.



Then I cried.....

I felt like I had been traveling with good friends for these nine days. We talked about my next time in Laos and wrote some notes on what there is to see in the south - there are some archaeological sites! Of course, it would include the Elephant Festival too. 2015. I'll be back!

As we neared the border we all became quiet. The transition was near. First Lao formalities. Easy. Then a 7km ride thru no-mans land to the Vietnamese buildings. We parked then walked toward them. Off to the side two men started walking towards us. Mrs. Perica? Yes. I am Chung from Ann Tours. Khamseng took a step back and said "he will take you thru".



After I was stamped into Vietnam, Chung took a photo of "los tres amigos." He and Tu (new driver) moved my little mountain of luggage to the their vehicle. This is when it lost it. It is hard to say goodbye to those who have introduced you so well to the Lao culture that you feel like a native, cared for you, made sure you saw the best of everything, selected foods you liked (no chili, no cilantro, nothing fried!), kept you safe on the most dangerous roads in the country, answered your every question and always looked happy to see you.

| Khamseng, me and Kon  
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| Khamseng, Kon and I kept waving to each other until I walked thru the border post and took my first steps into Vietnam.

I missed them already.