

DREAMING BY THE MEKONG

**GUS CAIRNS
discovers the
remote and
beautiful city of
Luang Prabang
in Laos**





YOU can fly to Luang Prabang in an ancient Chinese prop plane, but that's somehow cheating.

No, to appreciate its isolation, you either spend two days idling down the Mekong River in a converted cargo boat from the Golden Triangle at the topmost tip of Thailand. Or, as we did, you take a 12-hour bus journey from Vientiane, the laid-back capital of Laos, over the mist-hung mountains.

At its end you will find 'The Best Preserved City in South-East Asia', a World Heritage site, a tiny town of 33 Buddhist temples and old French colonial mansions snoozing by the broad Mekong river.

"Enchanted" and "tranquil" are the words the travel guides use to describe Luang Prabang, which gives you a clue that this is not a town for beach-party ravers. The restaurants shut at 10 and the bars at 12. You get woken at 4am anyway by the monks' reveille – hefty thumps on huge hanging drums – and then an hour later by the many magnificent town roosters (the Laos love cockfighting).

At 6.30am the monks process through the morning mist to collect alms from townspeople kneeling at the roadside.

However, we soon discovered that there is more to Luang Prabang than meets the already-ravished eye. Walking along a hushed street one night, we saw a rainbow flag, heard a blast of The Weather Girls, and stumbled into the Khob Chai Bar, literally the Thank You Bar, Laung Prabang's one and only outpost of gay liberation. Here we found ourselves being entertained by the Swedish owner and buying Beerlao for a tableful of

young men of an affectionate and hopeful disposition. Coming from Thailand to Laos next door is like coming from the UK to Romania. A small, poor country of six million, it has only just emerged from a tragic half-century of war and the ensuing hardline communism.

There are few cultural taboos about homosexuality; and huge poverty – which means that it's not that difficult to meet a local lad, but that a degree of 'help' is appreciated. 'Help', apparently, is about \$25.

However overt prostitution is fiercely penalised, as the Lao government is determined to avoid their lovely country turning into a sex-tourism dump like parts of Thailand.

So it's illegal to have a Lao person in your hotel room overnight or have sex with them unless you're married to them. What this actually means is that if you meet a local lad you're more likely to get invited back to his place.

I had much of this explained to me in Khob Chai by the charming Chittakone 'Douk' Vannadeth, who told me proudly he was the town's one and only gay travel guide.

He works for Utopia Tours, the gay travel company who have long recruited a roster of local gay boys to show timid tourists round Thailand and are now expanding into less raucous destinations like Laos.

The Lao folk are lovely, a gentle and modest people. There's none of the hustle you get in other Asian countries. And the whole place is so goddamn stunning. Everywhere you go there's living, working Buddhist temples, each fantastically decorated in gold and mosaic, and populated by hordes of orange-robed monks.

Climb up the town's central hill to its golden spire to see the sun set over the river or, better still, hire a boat across the Mekong and see it from the ruined hilltop temple of Wat Chom Phet, a location straight out of 'Crouching Tiger'.

Take a trek further into those folded hills to visit the dusty villages of Laos's numerous tribes, kip among their piglets and buy their stunning textiles.

Make sure one of those treks ends at Tad Khoung Si. Here, 29km south of town, is the archetypal tropical waterfall, a 200-foot, multi-level cascade. You can swim at the bottom but if you have a good guide like Douk he'll take you along the hair-raising path to swim in the secret turquoise pool near the top. ►



Photos by gus@guscairns.com

► Lung Prabang may be remote but you don't have to rough it. There are \$5-a-night flophouses, sure, but \$15 will get you a squeaky-clean guesthouse room and \$50-60 will get you a bed at the town's top hotels. We chose the Sala Luang Prabang, an elegant colonial villa (former guest: Mick Jagger). So if your previous experience of South-East Asia has been raving with E-heads or fending off ladyboys, I'd recommend a week's elegant tranquillity in one of the world's most stunning locations. Email Douk at douk2003@hotmail.com and say Gus sent you.

> See:
The Khob Chai bar:
<http://www.explore-laos.com>

Utopia Tours:
<http://www.utopia-tours.com/laos.htm>

Sala Luang Prabang Hotel:
<http://www.salalao.com/prabang.htm>

> To make a reservation email salabang@salalao.com

> Lao Aviation fly four times a day from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Bangkok Air fly direct to Luang Prabang from Bangkok on Wednesday and Saturday. To catch the bus (6.30 or 7.30am), get your taxi driver to take you to the Northern Bus Terminal at Vientiane.

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