



Time Travels in Laos

Published on February 4th, 2013 | by Bangkok 101

While it may be this fast thanks to modern technology and convenience, and even if you can get the best wood fire pizza in the country in Luang Nam Tha these days, this part of the world still remains in a time warp where one can be magically transported back some twenty to thirty years, to the days of simplicity, where everything is made by hand, the pace of life is slow, and people have plenty of time to smile.

While it may be this fast thanks to modern technology and convenience, and even if you can get the best wood fire pizza in the country in Luang Nam Tha these days, this part of the world still remains in a time warp where one can be magically transported back some twenty to thirty years, to the days of simplicity, where everything is made by hand, the pace of life is slow, and people have plenty of time to smile.

The big draw of Luang Nam Tha (LNT) nowadays is the Nam Ha Protected Area, an area of over 200,000 hectares of mountain, forest and rivers, named as an ASEAN Heritage site in 2005. Home to tropical rainforest and hundreds of species of wildlife, birds and plants, the Nam Ha beckons travelers to go trekking and kayaking, all of which can easily be accessed from Luang Nam Tha.



While the wildlife spotting can be pretty sparse due to the density and depth of the forest, and while mountain trekking lovers might certainly be better off heading to Nepal or the Andes, the cultural aspect of the Nam Ha area is what makes a visit here a sure winner, along with some fantastic kayaking to boot.

Vast numbers of ethnic minorities inhabit the areas around LNT, including the Akha, Lanten, Yao, Thai Dam, and Phu Noi to name but a few.

All of these groups continue to live in small villages leading agricultural lifestyles. Homes are made out of bamboo thatch and wood, villagers spend time weaving bamboo baskets (used to carry everything brought in or out of each village) and cooking on open hearths, and while most villages now have electricity and satellite dishes, nights still tend to be quiet and dark, as everyone continues the old ways of early to bed and early to rise.

While some of the ethnic groups are more traditional than others (Lanten women still shave their eyebrows after marriage and the Akha still wear ornate headdresses), even the ones who have adopted western dress still offer a fascinating glimpse into a way of life that has long vanished on this side of the border. Old men sit and weave fishing nets and baskets, pigs get slaughtered by hand in front of the entire village, and the women and children often walk miles carrying wood for cooking.



While statistics show Laos to be a "poor" country, it is blessed by having the lowest population density in SE Asia, and, as everyone has a place to live, food, and plenty of space without cars, pollution, crime, and few of the other modern ills that plague the world outside, it is no wonder that the children run around freely constantly wishing visitors a big sabai dee (hello) everywhere one goes.

Of course no paradise is as idyllic as it seems. The Chinese have big plans for Luang Nam Tha, as the proposed rail line that will run from Kunming to Bangkok is going to come through here, and there are signs of building and construction on the horizon. But for now, the area remains a highly worthwhile visit whether it be for a weekend or longer.

Stay:

Zeula Guesthouse offers simple and comfortable rooms with guaranteed hot water (a rarity in LNT), WiFi, and plenty of other amenities in several gorgeous teak buildings. Rooms here only run about B300 a night, yet they are some of the best in town. For something a bit more secluded, The Boat Landing charges the highest prices (B750) and is 10 kilometres out of town, but does have a quiet and intimate hideaway along the Nam Tha River. www.zeula-guesthouse.com
www.theboatlanding.laopdr.com

Do:

There are a lot of options for trekking around LNT, both in type of trek and whom one does it with. Highly recommended is kayaking on the Nam Ha River, which gives some of the best views of the forest and allows visits to multiple villages along the way. The best operator to do this with is The Forest Retreat, a new restaurant/café/trekking agency that is the talk of the town in LNT. Run by a pair of Kiwis with a love of the surroundings, it's focused on creating sustainable eco-tourism in the region, and their guides are well trained and speak English. Additionally, the restaurant churns out some of the best wood fire pizzas in Asia, along with all sorts of baked goodies, gourmet coffees, and things you'd never imagine getting in this far flung neck of the woods. <http://forestretreatlaos.com>

by Dave Stamboulis