

Day 1
Monday 10th January, 2005
Bangkok to Chiang Mai

Amid the chaos and pandemonium of Bangkok traffic we all variously arrived at the Airport and heaved respective sighs of relief as we settled on the right flight to Chiang Mai. It was good to know we were now in the hands of others to make (at least some) decisions for us and to “go with the flow”. Rick and Jane were more relieved to board as the doors were closing. They had really been given the run around in the traffic chaos of Bangkok.

At Chiang Mai we were met by our guides and hosts from REST, Noi, Sophie, Sarod and Mu who warmly welcomed us to their country. We piled our luggage into a songthauw with Noi and our passports and piled ourselves into the two mini-buses with drivers, Nikom and Bum who drove us past the campus of Chiang Mai University and up a steep winding road to the summit of the mountain which overlooks the city. Rick was imagining how he would like to race a motor-cycle around the many cambered bends.

At the summit we visited Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep. With fresh verve we all ascended climbing up three hundred (plus) steps. This temple honours a white elephant which tradition tells died at this spot on this mountain-top. We gazed with various levels of amazement at the temples and buddas and learnt much of the predominant religion of Thailand ((95% of all Thais are Buddhists). We learnt that Singhas were guardians to the temples as well as being a brand of beer. We observed many rituals of worship including perambulating around the central temple and we learnt that Buddha was born under a Sala Tree (*Shorea robusta Roxb*) 543 Bush Christmas and died under one. We learnt about the white elephant and so many ways in which the Buddhists observe their religion.

From this vantage point we could barely see the city due to the level of smog.

Upon returning to Chiang Mai we settled into our charmingly delightful accommodation and enjoyed a Vietnamese meal full flavour and colour. Some of us rested, others hit the supermarket for all the items that were forgotten or mislaid.

Then an afternoon tea to rival many – a spread of Thai sweets, made of sticky rice and egg, shaped into a variety of fruits and flowers.

We then embarked on a tour of the old city in the bus. We checked out the old city wall and one of the gates. Mu set us all a challenge to identify the number of temples in one particular street. We are all curious to know who won and what was the prize.

Dinner was at the Antique House, an old traditional timber building. Again good food and company.

We completed the evening with a visit to the night market and a trip back to the hotel in a songthauw.

*The morning outing visiting the Wat Doi Suthep
Which we ascended climbing up three hundred
step.*

*The banquet back at Suan Doi House was
Vietnamese.*

*We were privileged to indulge in meals such as
these*

*After some shopping there was more than coffee
and tea*

*The sweets were great but they challenged our
capacity*

*Then it was off to do some exploring and
walking*

*We counted the Wats while the guides did the
taking*

*Dinner at Antique House was served Lanna
Style*

*Before we across to the night market to walk
their aisle*



Day 2
Tuesday 11th January
Chian Mai to Ban Yan Luang

Breakfast was finished and we left the Suan Doi House by 8.30 stopping at Chom Thong to get change at a bank whilst others went to the toilet and found a fruit and vege market.

Our next stop was a tour of a wonderful old house, now a museum, Ban Rai Phai Ngarm. An old lady started a rival in the craft of weaving which is now continued by her daughter. It employs ten women. Access to the house which sits beside the Ping River was up a beautiful bamboo avenue.

We then followed the Mae Jaem River visiting the Orchid Beach Luang National Park where we had lunch in the restaurant, after which we walked across the Obluang gorge on a high bridge to see the 3,500 year old grave site on the other side, the remains from which were transferred to the Chiang Mai Museum) we also saw some rock art, animal salt licks and a beautiful river with granite boulders and spectacular gorge, The forest was very dry with nothing green at ground level and all the leaves

on the trees either brown and falling as a result of the worst drought for 30 years.

The drive on to our village of Ban Yan Luang was up over a quite high and twisty road taking about another hour and a half, passing hill tribe villages, cabbage farms and Thermal springs.

We assembled at the Central Wat where we were allocated our hosts and had time for a wash and tidy up before meeting again at the house of Vi Lai the weaver.

We sat under the house and ate fresh tamarind. The village wish man performed a traditional welcoming ceremony while we all held a length of cotton while he chanted in the Bail language to keep us safe. Then he tied around each individual's left wrist and cut the string to leave us all with a bracelet.

We had amazing music played for us by a reeded bamboo flute, two guitar like instruments each with two strings and a wonderful two string violin with a coconut shell sound box.

About ten lovely little girls from the village elementary school in traditional costume danced for us.

We were then very fortunate to be able to go to the wake of a 76 year old man and met his 62 year old widow who looked more like 85. The old people all still chew betel, with resultant tooth staining. The men had whisky and the women had a very sweet Milo chocolate drink. The coffin was upstairs and outside lots of villagers sat watching TV while the men gambled.



*Ban Rai Ngarm was all about spinning and weaving
We learnt much of its traditions before we were
leaving.*

*At Ob Luang Park we experienced monsoon ecology
And discovered a little of its prehistory
anthropology.*

*Then past hot spring, teak plantations over
mountain roads,*

*Mikod's mini buses carried their precious loads.
The school children came to demonstrate a Thai
dance*

*Then while the orchestra played we all had a chance
So well relaxed, entertained and being well fed,
Most welcomed the chance to be early to bed.*



Day 3 Wednesday, 12th January Ban Yan Luang Village

The day dawned chilly and dry at about 6.30. People were lighting small fires around the town. Roosters stopped crowing and dogs went off duty. Produce was carried along quiet streets to market. The group's various hosts served sticky rice, meats and vegetables for breakfast. Everyone assembled at the village wat at about 9.30 to discuss plans for the day after Rick had discovered that the pump beside the wat was a Kelly & Lewis pump all the way from Melbourne.

We went to the Ban Yan Luang kindie where parents were bringing children from their motor bikes. Then we were divided into two groups: weaving and bamboo craft. We were then given the opportunity to buy items at the very place that they were made.

A Young woman named Nitta Ya was making a wall hanging for the Thai Royal Family to a set pattern. When completed it will have 85 sections each 2 by 2 metres square. Nita Ya has taken two and a half years to four to five squares. She mastered this craft by the age of 21 and the pattern is the most difficult and complicated one of all to learn. We were given the opportunity to try basic weaving ourselves.

Ang, the bamboo artist also learned his art from a very young age. He is now 73. He was using a very large, sharp knife (a meet) to cut the bamboo into strips and was using his toes as an anchor. His many creations included birds, horses, crocodiles and frogs.

After a sumptuous lunch we were taken to a neighbouring village of Ban Phrou Nuom in the Lanna area within the Mae Jaem Region. Sarod pointed out Doi Inthanon, the highest mountain in Thailand at the southern end of the Himalayas. We were also taken to Wat Buddha-on, a temple made from teak 300 years ago. Its large thick columns inside would not be

found in any modern constructions. The temple is undergoing continuous repairs.

Ten panels along the walls depict the ten lives of Buddha. Each teaches a basic lesson such as giving selflessly to others (elephant). After this we were shown a special holy water spring which provides clean drinking water to people of various religions who come there .

Upon returning to our village we were taken to visit the medicine man (called a “mor mueang”). He was attending a village funeral so was a bit delayed. To fill the time Sophie produced banana cakes and prawn crackers and Sheena did a loaves and fishes act using John’s pocket knife. He was disappointed that we couldn’t manage the next miracle turning water into wine).

The mor mueang showed us some plants which provided cuts, gum problems and broken bones. Other uses described were for washing hair, cooking and poultices. He explained that he had studied a mixture of herbal and modern medicine and uses them both interchangeably. The afternoon was finished off with a surprise sauna and cold shower — Just what the doctor ordered for sure!

The evening produced another excellent meal cooked and coordinated by the village women which served as a buffet eaten seated along the walls of a very large room on the ground floor of the house opposite Vilai’s (Vilai heads the weavers).



*The morning of craft included weaving the cotton thread
But 'twas hard avoiding knees and getting it all in
the head.
Ank did his craft after splitting bamboo with his
“meet”
Before turning it into frogs, birds etc all so neat.
After lunch it was off to a anther village and a Wat
with a spring
We sampled its waters seeking the beauty its alleged
to bring.
Before learning about herbs and having a sauna
bath
And back to our homestays on a now familiar path*

Day 4 Thursday, 13th January To Doi Inthanon & Chiang Mai

Ban Yang Luang A beautiful misty dawn pink cloud over the mountain behind the Wat. In the field of onion and garlic the water was being ladled over the crops from flowing canals.

It was merit making day. The monks walked along our line as we handed gifts of rice fish fruit biscuits. We stood barefoot in the dusty courtyard as we made our offering. The gifts accepted we moved inside the Wat. We were given a candle and a flower. The lit candle was placed on a stand only by men in front of a huge gold Buddha. A blessing was chanted for our well being.

A warm farewell to our gracious welcoming hosts who sent us off with a packed lunch. A steep climb to 2596 metres leaving dry monsoon forests toward the now dry cloud forest. Moss clothed trees dangling llianes and ferny undergrowth. Before the summit of the tallest mountain in Thailand Doi Inthanon two native pine species *Pinus merkusi* and *Pinus keysiya* appear. Closer to the summit white rhododendron intrigued our eyes these were mixed with smaller shrubs. Tall wind-blasted, contorted dead trees indicate the ferocity of the winds. Temperature of 14 degree C the brightest of blue skies a cloudless “cloud forest”. There were continuous mountain vistas.

After walk along an elevated board-walk in the forest we met a met a most colourful ethnic group celebrating their Hmong New Year.

There was a steep drive to the temperate valley. A stop to meet three guides from the Pakagayor community. These guides led us a rather rough and steep path through the forest. Once rice fields has now been regenerating for 20 years encouraged by the National Parks. Along the way teak, pines. Erythrina in full flower A surprise was mother of one of our guides greeted us nonchalantly leaning on the head of the up-ended axe, happily stopping to pose for photos, after that down a steep track carrying a 50 kg basket load of wood on her head. Slivers were gouged out from a pine tree as a fire starter especially in the wet season.

In village the valley floors are intensively farmed, vegetable and flowers inside plastic covered growing houses. Some green houses are made from local bamboo and plastic. Newer metal framed green houses are financed by loans from the king.

Produce is forwarded to Bangkok markets hopefully to make a profit and pay off debt. Steep slopes terraced produce one rice crop annually. Land lies fallow with cattle grazing

adding their fertilizer. After rice harvests young men of the village must travel away to find any work. Oral history tells 200 years the village was purchased from the local prince at the cost of one elephant.

On our return to Chiang Mai and after dinner at an open air restaurant beside the Ping River, we said a sad “Farewell” to our wonderful guides, Sophie and Mu.



*On a crisp winter morning at the Ban Yan Luang Wat
We made merit inside while outside they splashed a lot.
There were many birds seen on Doi Inthanon mountain
But how long will their at risk cloud forest habitat remain?
The three-kilometre walk through the forest led to a Karen village
“‘Twas steep in places so we were glad to reach the bamboo restaurant stage
We forded the creek, crossed paddies and reached a waterfall
We rested and immersed feet until “All aboard” came Sarod’s call.
The transition from quiet rural life and forests of tranquillity
Contrasted with smog, noise and traffic of Chiang Mai city.*



**Day 5
Friday, 14th January
Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai**

“Up your lifestyle”, “Up your green world” — So the billboard proudly proclaimed. We think they meant “improve your lifestyle” but we will never know. Out through the suburbs of Chiang Mai and into the hills which included the Kun Chae National Park.

We drove through some steep valleys with heavy forest on a sinuous mountain road with optional double yellow lines. We came across one of the

police checkpoints used for controlling access to the lowlands by the hill-tribe people, many of whom are stateless, as they have not fulfilled the necessary requirements for citizenship.

Then back down on to the Nam Mae Lao river flats with big paddy fields, some already planted out, hayricks and thatched huts.

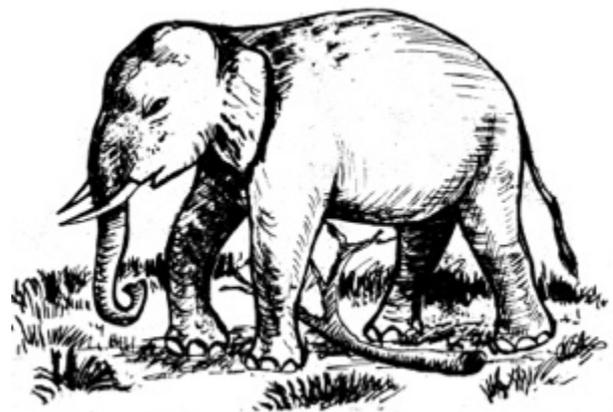
*“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of other things
Like Chiangs and Maes and sealing wax
And cabbages and things
Like condoms with a smile on them
And whether pigs have wings!”*

Inspired by the billboards in Ban San Sai village

Further on off to the left of the highway we caught a glimpse of a glittering “Ice Temple” near Pang Khun.

Arriving in Chiang Rai at 11.00a.m. (approx) we indulged in a short burst of feverish banking and shopping and then after farewelling our drivers, Bum, Nikom and Tok and meeting our new guides, A, Pooh and Jay, we lunched at a splendid local restaurant with fabulous food — lop roast duck and pork.

Into local taxis and off to the Kok River for our trip in longtail boats up to Ruammit Village for elephant rides. The river trip took us through river flats with extensive tobacco and maize fields, a large prison, and a large resort, all at great speed and very noisily! Thank heavens that Australian public transport does not depend on an elephant. Consuming 200 back kilos of food and 400 litres of water, elephants produce enough dung to power a small town! (as indeed is being done by the school at the instigation of one of the brighter 12 year old boys!) The dung is fermented to produce methane gas for cooking and power generation and the end product after fermentation is used as fertilizer or for making paper!



Then onto the trek — two people per elephant for about an hour rambling through the hills behind the village, ending up with a gentle paddle in the river to the boarding station. Friendly mahoots, petrol station halfway round where we could buy bananas and maize to encourage our animals to greater effort!

Back to Chiang Rai and the Golden Triangle Inn in time to unpack and do (or hand in) the washing.

We gathered again at 6.30 and set off for the Night Market for dinner and retail therapy. Some elected for the restaurant while others went to the food stalls. Both groups were treated to a stage show of live acts, with traditional or western music and some gorgeous lady boys. The deep fried bamboo worms, crickets and a giant water bug were an interesting footnote to the meal. (Lovely grub!!!) The proliferation of baggies as we coalesced into clumps around the market showed that most people managed to find a satisfactory outlet for their purse anxiety.

The Elephant

by Ogden Nash (as recalled by Jeanne Klodahl)

Elephants are useful friends
Equipped with handles at both ends
They hold each other's hindmost handles
And flee from mice and roman candles.
They have a leathery moth-proof hide
Their teeth are upside down outside
Their tusks are white; their skin is emery
And they have the most tenacious memory

Day 6 Saturday, 15th January Thai Cooking Classes (Shirley & Wendy)

When it comes to this time of the day — close to bedtime — this morning seems so far away. Again our day has been filled with delights and excitement. Today, our sixth together has been brilliant.

We were warned not to eat too much breakfast — a wise warning ignored by some of us. At 9.00 am we were introduced to Ben and his sister (and assistant) Boum and were transported to the fresh food market. Here Ben led us from one area of the market to another from noodles to vegetables, coconut milk and curry paste to mushrooms, herbs, fresh fruit and sweets. At each stall Ben named and described items which were not familiar to some of us. At the fruit stall we tasted ka-nam-krak, delectable sticky rice and spring onions in scone trays and khao-neuw-ping — sticky rice wrapped around banana, potatoes on coconut Yum! Yum!

When our baskets, which Ben had provided, were filled with goodies needed for our cooking, we were driven to his Thai cooking School aptly named the Hot Wok. There we spent the next six hours being instructed in the art of preparing simple Thai dishes and being greatly impressed by the expert and efficient organization which Ben and his assistants had created in the six months since he began his cooking school in Chiang Rai.

We all donned aprons (made by Ben's Mum) and settled into preparing the ingredients and then cooking Pad Thai (Fried noodles Thai style) in the

thirteen woks waiting for us in the kitchen downstairs.



When the food was cooked we all trooped upstairs sat on our stools or cushions and devoured our creation — unanimous decision — a gastronomic delight.

Back to the preparation where “fairies” had cleaned up our mess and had prepared the ingredients for some Som-Tam (Papaya Salad) including tiny green potent chillies commonly referred to as “mouse shit”.

This was the pattern for the rest of the day at school — prepare, cook, eat and as we moved from preparation room to the kitchen to the dining room, Ben's assistants worked the magic of cleaning up and arranging the next set of ingredients. We cooked and ate Tom Yum Kung (Hot and Sour Prawn Soup) Nam Prik Gaeng Waan (Green curry paste where there was controlled “heat” of the paste by the number of mouse shit chillies we used — from 0 to 12 depending on our taste) Gaen Kaan Waan Kai (Green Curry with chicken) and for dessert Kao Neeawn Ma Muang (Mangoes with sticky rice). What an interesting innovative and delicious day!

During the 40 minute break some of us went to King Mengrai's Statue. It is a monument to the 25th king of the Lua dynasty of Thailand surrounded by beautiful gardens and statues.



Ben is a delightful young man, so thoughtful and competent. We all wished him continued success in his venture and if it sounds like a commercial for Hot Wok so be it

Back to the Golden Triangle for a brief spell then at 6.00 pm off to the Fundraising festival for tsunami victims. — From the mountains to the sea”. They gave us stickers which read *“Best wishes and kindest thoughts from Chiang Rai people to the southern people who suffered the recent disaster”*. A concert was in progress with a Hill tribe chorus, several singers and an amazing little girl — about 9 or 10 perhaps who sang and performed with charm and professional skill. Many locally made goods for sale as fund raisers. Among some of our purchases Shirley bought a jar of red stuff. She did not know if it contained strawberry jam or chilli but has promised to let us know.

But that was not the end of our day. We were driven in trucks — Our means of transport all day to Kantoke. This is a craft centre/ restaurant owned by a professor from a local school. Here we had dinner. Some of us could still manage to eat after the Hot Wok experience and were entertained by grade 10 students of the Samakeewittayakom School. They had a 9-piece orchestra providing continual music and we were entranced by the beauty, elegance and skill of the young dancers who performed the Long finger dance and the Silk dance and by the expert precision of the young girl who performed with 12 long bladed knives. The entire band and instrument departed on the back of a utility waving goodbye enthusiastically. The exquisite dancers were still wearing their costumes and make-up.

As we left the restaurant we explored the art gallery and craft shop. The boxes of decorative candles, fridge magnets wooden carvings pottery elegant materials appealing and we wished we had more time to enjoy them.

The “All Aboard” had us back to the sonata and back to the Golden Triangle Inn and off to bed.



Day 7 Sunday, 16th January Chiang Rai to Pangsa

It was a relatively leisurely start in Chiang Rai. There was time to include a wander around the town as well as breakfast. But at 9.00 am it was All Aboard two songtaus to head for the hills with most of our luggage sitting on the roof.

About an hour after leaving Chiang Rai we arrived in Pangsa Village and stowed our luggage in the home of the Village Headman and made the obligatory visit to the Thai toilet before our walk.

This was a most interesting walk with stoops along the way for Poo and our village guide to answer an endless stream of questions.

- The style of house design with an earthen floor is part of the Lisu culture;
- The old man and his wife were installing a new thatch roof over their pig sty and we could see the technique of thatching;
- Many ribbons around the termite infested tree stump were part of Lisu culture to persuade termites to reside there rather than in their houses.
- The water filter clarified but didn't otherwise treat the water for the village.
- The spirit house in the teak plantation allowed the spirits and other travellers refuge there. Nearby we spied the village still which we were told with some embarrassment was no longer in use.
- There were many descriptions of the uses for the product of the forest bush bananas, various gingers, bamboo, wood (gathered by the women for the imminent New Year festivities), and broom heads (worth 14 baht a kilo when dried) and the farming techniques.
- Buffalo were used as savings rather banks;

It was a most interesting if arduous walk which took an hour and a half to reach a waterfall where a splendid surprise treat was in store for us

The setting was incredible. Smoke rose from the small amphitheatre at the bottom of the waterfall from a fire lit by the villagers who had arrived there before us with the food for our lunch. They also had lots of freshly cut bamboo which they proceeded to sculpture into all sorts of shapes before our eyes. They produced drinking goblets, large sections into which they placed the food which they prepared, chopsticks, eating bowls and more. They cooked on the fire three dishes including one dish of banana flowers and another with vegetables they had also collected on the way. These were served with sticky rice which was also cooked in bamboo before our very eyes.

Day 8
Monday 17th January
Hill Tribe Villages

They then layed out a table on freshly cut banana leaves and served us this royal feast with the backdrop of the waterfall roaring behind us. It was a feast we will remember all or lives. Of course it was enlivened even more when the men produced a bottle of sake.

Then it was back on the very rough track through the jungle to the flatter land. We then followed a vehicle track and the road on a longer but easier walk back to Pangsa village.

That night we all ate with our host families and got to know them better and to appreciate the simple Lisu lifestyle. We ate dinner with our hosts before assembling to meet one of the villagers who works for HADF who told us the history of the village and how it was established only about 10 years ago. It was another unforgettable day forever impressed on our minds by the amazing meal in bamboo by the waterfall.

Pangsa Waterfall Haiku

Lunch served in bamboo
By a waterfall delights
Learning old cultures



The Rooster (Ogden Nash)

*The Rooster is a roistering hoodlum
Whose battle cry is "Cock-a-doodlum!"*



There are 137 families in Pangsa we were told and 800 people. However the dawn chorus suggested that roosters outnumbered humans.

Frank's Day — Jakorna: We left Pangsa Village after meeting the village Head man who was at a conference the previous day and night. He showed us around the village and took us to the school before we went down to the bridge. Here the villagers had strung out a number of barbed wires across the stream to stop anyone getting at the fish which congregated under the bridge waiting to be fed by the villagers. It helps to conserve the fish stocks.

Aboard our two songthauws we then went on to Ruandai School where 300 students from five surrounding villages attend. They range from Years one to 12 (High School). All except students from a village near the Burma Border walk to school each day. The latter board at the school during the week in a dormitory, returning home on weekends.

We arrived at Jakorna where Mr Jakorn (the village head man brought the Lahu villagers 20 years ago. Rice was spread out to dry on a tarpaulin and dogs, pigs and chooks had to be constantly chased away from it.

Most houses in Jakorna were built on stilts but with bamboo walls, bamboo floor, thatched roofs and no windows. Cooking was done on an open fire in the middle of the house set on a bed of clay. A few houses had rough sawn wooden floors and walls and corrugated fibro roofs.

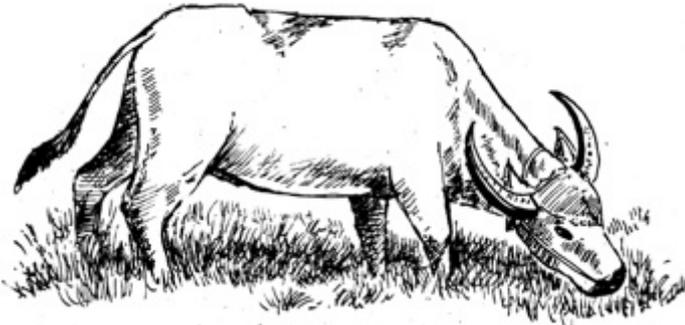
There are about 200 people in the village only 6 or 7 kilometre from the Burmese (Myanmar) border. There is an army base in the village with soldiers being rotated every month. They are very friendly. Frank drank green tea with them and they explained that there is no drinking or smoking in the army. The lighting in the village houses is provided by batteries which are recharged by solar power.

After lunch we walked to the next village (Heyko) a Lisu village where we met some locals including the local "doctor" who played his flute for us and showed us through his house. Some parts of the walk were steep and slippery.

Late afternoon we returned to Jakorna in the back of a utility and we picked up various other people on the way and finished up with 15 people in the back. It was a very exhilarating experience.

After another delicious meal and a gathering with Mr Jakorn we went to another house to be entertained by eight young lasses in traditional Lahu costumes which were very elaborate and they performed some very traditional Lahu

dances and songs which they were preparing for the New Year. We had to reciprocate so John laughed like a kookaburra and we sang “Kookaburra Sits in an Old Gum Tree”, “Click Go the Shears” and “Waltzing Matilda”.



Changes at Jakorna in Four Years
By John Sinclair

Jakorna dogs no longer bark during the nights
And have even been trained to avoid chicken fights.
The pigs and the chickens still freely roam around
But amongst the dwellings buffalo are no longer
found.
The army now broadcasts news from the world
outside
And they rebuilt the road more level and more wide
Children attend school daily after an hour long walk,
But back at home still have energy for play and talk.
Each villager now has a solar powered electric light;
But the floors still creak for farang walkers at night.



Wakened as usual by cocks crowing. Breakfast at 7.30. Potatoes with pork fat, cabbage and tofu. Bought a few trinkets and gave gifts. Met at 8.30 and went to the local school which looked well resourced and organized. Then saw all fish in the river swarm up when fed. Barbed wire was stretched across water on each side of the bridge to stop fishing there.

Then a few kilometres to another school which took children from kindergarten to Year 12 where we were shown around. Gum trees grew all around the school. We then split into two groups and we went to the Akha Village Layko.



Jeanne Klov Dahl

Day 9
Tuesday, 18th January
Hill Tribe Villages

As day broke over Jakorna Village there were small figures scurrying in the dark washing our dishes from last night’s meal and children preparing for the hour-long walk to their school. The village leader began to announce the day’s happenings from a rather scratchy PA system. Dogs yelped their displeasure at the irritating sound the speaker produced. The first project of the morning was to construct a bamboo fence around the community fishpond where pigs and ducks had been stirring up the mud. Also someone had thrown a meatball into some waterway trench.

Just before breakfast women and safarists busied themselves winnowing rice. John’s effort put everyone else’s promptly in the shade!

After a delicious breakfast safarist were warmly farewelled with “blessing” strings.

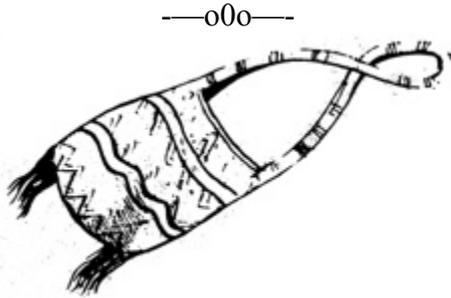
Poo explained to us that activities had been added to the food produced by the village so that it would last a little longer at the market.

On our way out of the village to rendezvous with the others we spotted a sign advertising “agro tourism” We had seen on the previous day one that read “Retcking tours”!



From Jane: The six of us at the Akha Village all enjoyed the morning sky — four of us from our beds in the highest bamboo house in the village! Rick, Jak and I had stayed down the hill with the village blacksmith, Lo Da and his delightful wife, Mi Noi. Mi Noi chose to dress in traditional costume as did some of the other women in her extended family and her betel nut stained mouth was always smiling. She was particularly delighted when, while waiting for our bus Jak trained his scope on the village on the opposite hilltop. A queue of excited villagers developed at the tripod, with lots of exclamations and giggling. Then our two-row” bus arrived (just before the mobile market, which we had to squeeze past on the narrow dirt

access road and we set off to join the other group, who had spent their morning in Jakorna.



When the groups met again at Mae Salong we were surprised to find that the actual program wasn't as we had expected. We'd thought that the two groups would be doing a swap with the apostles going to the Lahu village and the Babblers going to the Akha one. But even John was surprised to find that instead we were going to rejoin and would not be staying in the village that night.

After a stop at a set of Chinese market stalls at Mae Salong we went to the 101 Tea Plantation for green tea dumplings (and samples of green tea) and then to the rather grand Chinese Martyrs memorial Museum. This told the history of the "solitary armed force" the remnant of the Kumintang forced out of China by the victorious Red Army, which spent many years in the hill country cut off but supported by their compatriots in Taiwan. Although they explained to the government of Burma (Myanmar) that they had no territorial designs, the Burmese government made many attempts to remove them by force, which all failed. After Burma brought the situation before the United Nations a joint Thai/Burmese/Chinese/US committee arranged their evacuation to Taiwan in 1954 but about 4000 were not evacuated. After Burma complained to the UN about their continued rearmament and resupply, they lived very hard lives for 8-9 years from 1961 until the Thai government agreed to take control of the "solitary army" and then used it to fight the Thai home-grown Miao Communist rebels. By 1979 this job had been completed. Many of the soldiers settled in Northern Thailand and with the assistance of their compatriots in Taiwan they formed the now prosperous Chinese communities among the hill-tribes. We lunched at a Chinese restaurant as a result of this history.

At about 2.30 we arrived at our lodgings for the night: the twin accommodation units that HADF (the Hill Area Development Foundation) and its tourist arm, Natural Focus now have available at their large and pleasant hilltop facility. We spent a very relaxing afternoon; some wrote letters, some went for a bird-spotting walk in the forest with Jak, some went for a walk to a nearby village with Poo. Showered and refreshed we then walked in the moonlight to dinner with three separate Akha families. We had a guide and translator with each group, so many questions were asked over our meals; and at about 9.00 pm we walked back to our beds.

Observations at Dinner: (Jeanne Klovdahl) The household we visited was home to 13 people, the grandfather (aged 61) and his wife (who did not appear) lived in with son (aged 32) his wife and numerous children. The TV stayed on during the meal. Dogs were allowed in the house and near the food; children played and laughed until about 8.30 pm. The whole atmosphere seemed more relaxed and friendly than previous get-togethers had been. The family was quite willing to answer personal questions about animism, courtship, marriage, pregnancy and childbirth. These comments included rituals, taboos and personal hygiene. Everyone was interested in our ages as they have been during our homestays!

Joke of the Day Award went to Alaskan Barbara:

John: *"At Akha weddings they throw manure at each other!"*

Barbara: *"Sounds like they have a dung good time!"*



Day 10 Wednesday, 19th January Hill Tribe Centre to Chiang Khong

The early morning was just right for a pleasant walk overlooking the valleys, cherry trees, tea trees. Our guide Poo took on the task of cooking breakfast with help from Environment Minister, Ni and Miaow — our young helpers. It was just a wonderful setting — birds of various varieties — white-eyes, sunbirds, bulbuls, butterflies flew around as we sat on a sun deck looking towards the mountains. Then breakfast was a feast of rice porridge flavoured with pandanus leaves, fruit of pomelo and melon, green veg, omelet, ham, wholegrain toast, plum jam, tea coffee and cocoa. It was a little strange spreading our butter with a fork or spoon though but what a treat!

Bags were packed and put on top of our two buses and we set off for Mae Sai descending over 400 metres on winding roads with lovely views again.

Thailand is shaped like the head of an elephant on a map. Mai Sai being the northernmost point is at the top of the elephant. This village is also the major crossing point into Burma (Myanmar) over the Ruak River. (It is literally on the road to Mandalay). Mai Sai is a teeming conglomerate of stalls selling everything from fake Adidas pants to (fake) genuine gemstones. We were warned by Poo. We lunched in a restaurant overlooking the river looking across to Burma. We also looked at each other's purchases — knives blouses pieces of embroidered material, purse, bags, fruit etc.

Back in the buses again to town of Chiang Saen we caught our first sight of the Mekong one of the biggest rivers in the world. The area is called the Golden Triangle (because of its history of producing opium in the past), We could view Laos, Burma and Thailand from a lookout (which they nominated as a "viewpoint"). There were (of course) stalls again to engage in our interest and again blouses, maps, skirts and children's wear were purchased. A 14th century Wat was close by and enclosed a relic of the Buddha. Poo and the girls checked their fortune by shaking a beaker until a number dropped.

We drove on again sighting many rocks in the Mekong and the trucks loaded with produce moving too and from China. The Chinese would like to blast the rocks to make easier access for shipping At the moment local villagers are objecting for various reasons.

We arrived in Chiang Khong and the Tammila Guest House overlooking the Mekong River. What a beautiful place to stay. Sadly we had to make our farewells to our dear and wonderful guide Poo and to A and the three girls. They have made our trip so extra special. They even presented us with T-shirts from the HAD Foundation. Noi was also here to welcome us and to share the good news that she is travelling with us on the river. Again we are looked after so well.

After a wonderful dinner we were introduced to Dej who founded REST in 1994. He will also be travelling on the river with us and Jak six members of the Chiang Khong community conservation group working to save the Mekong River. We are looking forward to our boat trip tomorrow.



Some of the Haiku (17-syllable verse [5,7,5] based on a theme of nature) vanished into cyberspace with the computer's relapse. These survived.

Some Mekong Haiku

I

People and river
Life blends to Nature's will
Nothing stops the flow

II

Currents and channels
Determine our boat's course
What regulates ours?

III

Rapidly the boat
Slips along the great Mekong
Life passes by quickly

IV

Strong hydraulic force
Reduces great rocks to grains.
Sand is abrasive.

V

Pressure when applied
Splits and shatters some rocks
But cements others.

Day 11

Thursday, 20th January Chiang Khong to Pak Beng (Rick & Sheena)

Woken before dawn by music wafting in through the windows. Bloody F.L on his computer again! No! Martial music, not opera! Hah! Must be our comrades across the river in Laos getting their wake-Inskip Point call and morning dose of rhetoric. The contrast between the doof music from the market last night and the military bands of the morning is quite striking.

We were treated to a wonderful "East is Red" sunrise whilst at breakfast – It's unfortunate that its spectacular effects were due to really thick air pollution.

Smog (A Haiku)

Soft sunlight struggles;
Man-made smog darkens the day;
Pollution poisons.

A lovely breakfast of fresh fruit salad and yoghurt scrambled egg and good toast set us up for the walk along the riverbank to Thai Immigration Control with an hour in the queue. Then a quick longboat trip across the river to

Laos visa control with its various dramas about missing visa photos and then the double passport saga! Eventually made it on to the utes for the short trip to the slow boats then “All Aboard!” and off down the river.

We were several hours late by then and so had to forego any short sightseeing stops en route.

The river flowed pretty fast, and we managed an average speed of 30 kph although the speedboats zipping past were doing at least twice that. An on-board lunch of fried rice, hardboiled egg and a green coconut (juice first then cut open for flesh) came just as the boat stopped at a logbook control station

As we continued down the river one of the Conservation Volunteers, Roong, who is a talented artist provided us with some lovely sketches of on-board characters.

The river drops 300 metres in 300 kilometres so the rocky bits provided a challenge for the skipper who learned his trade from his father, and who owns the boat. There are long stretches of steep sandy banks with various forms of fishing practiced and herds of cattle, buffalo (kwai) and goats. Many of the buffalo were albinos and glistened pinkly as they left the water. Many small streams flowed into the river from the steep mountains on either side

Boiling whirlpools and rapids were usually accompanied by wonderfully layered and folded rock formations, with occasional quartz and limestone reefs with some large white cliffs above them. We passed many small isolated villages which have rudimentary or non-existent schooling, health services and sanitation. With a population of only 6 million and a self-serving government keeping resources in Vientiane and the other major centres, life along the river is very hard for many people. Occasional groups of people panning for gold seem to be the only other industry.

After six hours on the river we had seen only 3-4 birds – quite amazing and given the experience most of us remember of Australian rivers.

As we pulled into Pak Beng the sun was starting to turn orange in the haze and after tying up we walked to our guesthouse in time to watch the sun set over the river again.

A convivial dinner was interrupted by a blackout which resulted in a candle-lit conclusion to another splendid and eventful day.

It was here that “Annie” was conceived to help trick Ai (a response to his dupe on us as we walked to the guesthouse). The fictitious “Annie” eventually was transferred to become the name of our riverboat.



Day 12
Friday, 21st January
Pak Ben to Luang Prabang
(Shirley & Wendy)

Last night we ran out of daylight so we couldn't reach our destination village of Had Tor (or Hadtoi). Instead we stayed at the Bummy Guest House at Pak Beng. On the back of the door of our room was printed a notice,

“Rules of the Guesthouse”.

Dear Guest who come to stay here. May you kindly read out rule and respect it.

- 1. It is prohibited to smoke, sale and buy any all illegal drug here.*
- 2. It is not allow to bring any belonging from this room to be yours.*
- 3. Switch off light, the fan and tap before leaving your room.*
- 4. Please return room key at the restaurant*
- 5. Please have drink, fun and talk ludly at the restuartant not in the room.*

Have a nice stay here and thank you very much. See you again.

Because we hope to visit Had Tor this morning we met at 7.00 am at the boat and departed at 7.30. We had breakfast on the boat. Actually what we thought we had was breakfast (two types of sweet doughnuts, fruit, sweeties from the market and tea or coffee) was actually the preliminary feast and presently delicious sweet and sour vegetables, sliced French loaf, marmalade & strawberry jam and papaya and bananas were presented.

As we sped slightly South and East the wind freshened and gradually people began to add layers. Margaret was the first to succumb. She donned a life jacket under her very colourful cardigan sitting behind the partition at the bow of the boat, slightly protected from the wind, wrapped herself in two blankets. I christened he the Snow Queen. Frank and Wendy wore glove, Legionnaires caps with cosy ear flaps secured under their chins jackets and they were wrapped in a blanket. Barbara Winkley wrapped herself in her sleeping bag. Helen curled up on the floor thinking she'd be warmer below deck but admitted it didn't make much difference. Sheena had a life-jacket over her warm woolly jumper and covered her knees with a blanket topped with a seat cushion. One of the crew was wrapped in a bright orange blanket / table-cloth looking like a Buddhist monk; another wore a balaclava just showing his eyes through a slit and looking like a terrorist.

During the morning Roong walked forward with his guitar and began to strum and to sing. Owing to the noisy motor only those closest to him could hear, Shirley unwrapped her Thai “Violin” purchased in Chiang Mai and until now safely wrapped in newspaper and plastic. We knew that Jacque could play this instrument and he obliged. Initially he tuned the two strings A and C and then began to play a duet with Roong. They both sang along. Jacque then gave Shirley a brief lesson so that she would be able to instruct her grandson who already learns the violin.

Meanwhile the stunning scenery was passing by. We hurtled down through the rush of rapids. We passed villages, boats, fishing nets, crops growing on the slopes between the water’s edge and the peak flood level, goats, pigs, buffalo (including pink albino ones) and a few cattle. Women and children were panning for gold (a few spots) and we observed several stands of teak forest obviously plantations as they were all of a uniform height and size. Both sides of the river were constantly lined with huge formations of sedimentary rocks ranging from little more than pebbles to five metres. The shapes and positioning of these rocks on the sandy banks were a source of constant amazement and wonder. Constantly we hear before we see the buzzing slim long speed boats transporting a few people, obviously in a hurry and boats similar to ours with as few as two passengers.

Just before 11.00 am the boat slowed down and pulled into the shore. We had arrived at Had Tor.



A number of villagers, adults and many excited children were at the landing hopefully waiting for the Farangs to arrive — 18 hours after our appointed arrival time!! They escorted us up the very steep and sandy incline to the village. The first building on the left was the Mekong Guest House which apparently caters for backpackers.

Some of us noticed two men cutting timber with a bamboo crosscut bow saw. They were making heavy work of it. Further up the hill we saw an elderly lady spinning. She was quite happy to be photographed and what a photographic opportunity!

We were all invited into the head man’s home. Brightly coloured woven mats were spread on the floor. Against the walls were a number of arm

chairs and a table made from thick slices of beautifully grained and polished timber.

We were instructed to sit around the room — The centrepiece was a low table with two candles vases of yellow celosia, bowls of rice, a bottle of whisky and about 10 bamboo slithers holding many short lengths of cotton string. We were offered rice whisky (65% proof) herbal tea and eventually beer.

We and our hosts partook of this liquid refreshment. Presently the Spirit man made formal greetings and chanted at length to appease the spirits in case we visiting Farangs inadvertently might do something to offend. He then asked us to lay one hand upwards on the edge of the central table. He took the two burning candles and the cellosia wrapped in banana leaf, dipped the ends in a cup of whisky and went back and forth clockwise and anti-clockwise caressing our palms with whisky. When the cup was empty he demonstrated that we should wipe our wet hands through our hair. After blowing out the candles he invited the villagers to take the lengths of cotton and tie them around our wrists to wish us happiness, good health and safe journey.

We realized that our allotted 40 minutes had expired and felt that it was time to leave. However at this point our hosts produced many bowls of small chunks of pork and chop-sticks. This was part of the pig that had been killed in our honour the previous evening.

Having eaten and imbibed one of the local gentlemen produced a drum and proceeded to provide rhythm for clapping and dancing. We concluded our visit to the Head-Man’s house by joining hands and singing “Auld Lang Syne”.

Before departing Had Tor we visited the temple which was over 100 years old. During the Vietnamese War the village was bombed but the temple escaped damage. We put contributions in the temple donations box before reluctantly taking our leave.

This experience had really been tremendous. We all agreed that it had been one of the most exciting “40 minutes” of our trip and we all regretted again that we had not been able to reach the village in time for the proposed overnight visit. However, one does wonder if perhaps, our absence the previous evening had helped to create the special atmosphere.

NOTE: Some of Shirley and Wendy’s notes from here on vanished into cyberspace so the remainder is contributed by F.L.

The villagers followed us down to the river and there was mutual reluctance to end our short acquaintance as we passed over the gifts we had brought for them and also gave them three hearty cheers.

Day 13
Saturday, 22nd January

Luang Prabang
Wats and the Royal Palace Museum
Fearless Leader

Then it was back to the rushing river and the dramas along it which included some staged races with other “slow” boats, more villages and the appearance for the first time in 250 kilometres of navigation aids in the river. We knew we were getting closer to Luang Prabang. Then we were back into spectacular limestone area with huge seemingly vertical bluffs rising near the river and the honeycombed eroded rocks along the shore and then we tied up at one such bluff which housed the Pak Ou Caves

Situated 25km upriver from Luang Prabang at the confluence of the Ou and Mekong rivers are two caves, Tham Ting and Tham Phun, that house countless numbers of Buddah images that have been left over hundreds of years by devotees. There were over 200 steep steps up to the upper cave which was so deep that one needed a torch inside to see the countless buddas. The lower cave was not as deep and had much more natural light. As we descended to rejoin Riverboat Annie,

Just downriver from the Pak Ou caves we pulled into the village of Ban Xang Hai, famous for its manufacture of rice whisky. The villagers carry water from the Mekong and use it to soak rice in large jars which sit for several days. The fermented rice yields alcohol which can be drunk as a cloudy liquid, or distilled to make a fire water. More off-putting was fact that the product was sold in bottles containing pickled snakes and scorpions. Shirley thought that it was very touristy because everything was quoted in US dollars and the whisky was much more expensive than in Had Tor. The Fearless Leader and Noi wandered off past the Wat with a very Chinese looking Buddha to observe the site where Australian archaeologists had excavated and dates the village back 720 years. Unfortunately there is no pottery currently carried out in the village site of the ancient kilns was being rapidly destroyed as new buildings covered them over because the government was unwilling to take any action to preserve them.

Then it was a relatively short ride (about 20 kilometres) to Luang Prabang where we tied up and ascended the many steps to the bus at the top which was waiting to take us to our guest house. With all our gear and guides aboard we went to the Xeing Muane Guesthouse a wonderful introduction to the blend of French Colonial and Asian culture that Luang Prabang represents in so many ways.

The bus had difficulty in negotiating its way in and out of the street the guest house was located in because of road works occurring on many of the cross streets. We also found it strange that Laotian traffic drives on the opposite side of the road to Thailand. This is probably another French legacy.

After settling in we went to the Som Chahn Restaurant for a wonderful dinner.



This is going to be difficult to record because so much has happened since. As I recall I had already written three columns documenting the events and activities of the day. Because I wrote it directly into the computer I have no notes so this is from recall more than a week and several thousand kilometres later.

Luang Prabang is an outstanding example of the fusion of traditional architecture and Lao urban structures with those built by the European colonial authorities in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its unique, remarkably well-preserved townscape illustrates a key stage in the blending of these two distinct cultural traditions.

It was to be a relaxed start so we weren't scheduled to breakfast until 9.00 am. Thus it was catch up time.

However most set of for early morning walks to explore this World Heritage city. Leonie and Jeanne went off to walk up and around Mt Phousi which had them exhausted by the end of the day. The early morning walk of Frank and Wendy and Sheena to explore the waterfront of Luang Prabang was disturbed by a stalker who shadowed them and refused to be put off their tail despite Frank confronting him. When the “tail” recruited a colleague it might have been difficult to tell who was most relieved to have company, Sheena and Wendy being protected by Frank or Frank being flanked by Sheena and Wendy!

The bus was waiting and took us off to the Som Chahn restaurant for an *al fresco* breakfast on the river bank. Getting there was some problem as a result of the simultaneous closure of many of the streets leading down to the riverside Esplanade? We were to become familiar with the circuitous detours to exit and access our Guesthouse.



After yet another wonderful Asian meal in a wonderful setting we again boarded our bus and headed off to the money changers to equip ourselves with the local currency, the Lao kip. We queued up with a few notes and came out with huge bundles of money.

Our schedule had to be readjusted because the Royal Palace Museum was due to close at 11.00 am so we decided to alternate the program and visit temple this morning.

Our first guide was Sit. The Chiang Khong based Mekong Conservation Group includes eight members in Luang Prabang. The Lao Government doesn't welcome the creation of non-government organizations within Laos. However it doesn't seem to mind its citizens belonging to NGO's resident in other countries. Our Lao guides belonged to this group and so had a bond with the group who had come down the river with us and who were busy cycling around the city building up their networks here while we were busy sightseeing.

Luang Prabang was the ancient capital of the mountainous region that makes up northern Laos. Over the years, wars have altered the political landscape many times, but Luang Prabang has remained a regional power. The French took control of the area in the late 19th century. During the brief French colonial period, Laos was ruled as a loose collection of kingdoms and principalities. The most obvious remnants of French influence are the colonial buildings and the baguettes that are available at bakeries throughout the country.

Luang Prabang is home to 32 traditional *wats*. Being the old royal capital, it has more wats and monks per capita than any other city. Most of the wats were rebuilt after being destroyed by the Black Flag Haw in 1887. Wat Xieng Thong escaped the destruction. That was the first temple we visited. It is the most magnificent of the city's *wats*. The major building (*sim*) was built in 1560, with other structures added over the years. The temple is the most stunning in Luang Prabang, richly decorated with coloured glass and gold. The temple is built on a bluff overlooking the Mekong River near its junction with the Khan. The rear of the *sim* is decorated with a tree-of-life mosaic. There is also a funerary carriage house where the royal funeral carriage is stored.



Back on the bus we went on to the next Wat. During the changeover we changed guides. Sit disappeared to be replaced by Keo who would remain with us until we left Luang Prabang. We had interpreted his name as "Gal" and continued calling him that almost until we parted.

Wat Wisunalat, like most of Luang Prabang's wats, was destroyed by the Black Flag Haw. It was originally made of wood, but was rebuilt with brick and stucco in the 1890s. It is perhaps best known for That Makmo (the watermelon stupa), located in front of the temple.

The main temple building is used as storage for a variety of Buddhist artifacts in various states of disrepair, waiting to be renovated. Outside there were many vendors selling tourist memorabilia. However we were taken to a smaller *sim* which Dej said had once housed the Emerald Buddha which was stolen by the Thais and which now resides in Bangkok. It was decorated with an incredible array of mural panels which were conveniently numbered but which didn't tell us much without the legend.

Luang Prabang is in many ways typical of cities throughout SE Asia. The street scenes and markets are very much like those we have seen elsewhere. But, this city is also different. It retains some of the charm of the French colonial architecture. Many factors are combining to help Luang Prabang live up to its status as a World Heritage City.



Back on the bus we stopped to do spot of shopping at Keo's Sister's shop. While the women were being measured up for clothing tailored to fit, those not indulging in a panic of purchasing had the tranquillity of watching the two young weavers at work on the looms outside. Rick and I watched them with mesmerized fascination for this ancient craft. We did some estimates of the progress of both the weaving projects, both table runners. At the rate of progress which we witnessed it would take about seven to eight working days to finish each project which was then being retailed in the shop for \$US7.00.

From there we went off to yet another interesting Asian lunch at another restaurant. Then it was off to the Royal Palace which is now a museum housing a collection of artefacts belonging to former rulers of the Kingdom of Lane Xang. It also houses the "prabang" which is a statue of Buddha Cast in Sri Lanka almost 2000 years ago and which is responsible for the city's name. Although photography wasn't allowed in the museum it was a wonderful

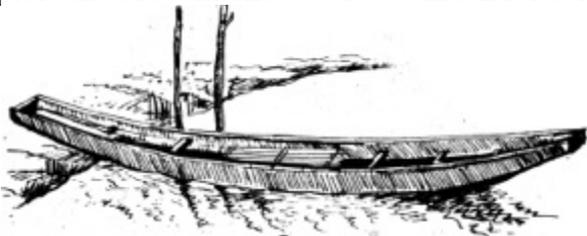
experience and well worth the 90 minutes or more we devoted to it.

While at the Royal Palace we had learned that there would be a performance of the Royal ballet at 6.00 pm that night so there was a hurried scrambling for tickets etc which we left in the capable hands of Noi while we went off to other explorations

Next on the agenda was the walk up to Mt Phousi and Wat That Chom Sii. It is 150m and over 300 steps up to gain spectacular grandstand views of the city and surrounding countryside. That Chomsi is visible from almost anywhere in the city. Unfortunately many people demurred from this walk and in the end only five people accompanied Keo up the hill but the grand views of the city made it well worth the effort. We descended passing other wats and Buddha images and a Buddha Footprint. It was a great experience.

Then briefly back to the Xieng Mouane Guesthouse there was barely time to do more than gather our tickets before being swept into the bus and off to the ballet which was really a stunning performance. We had a wonderful excerpt from the Raymayana, “Trial by Fire” in which an abducted Queen had to prove to her husband that she had been chaste while she was in custody by an ordeal of fire. In this there was some wonderful energetic dancing by the teams of male dancers who wore wonderfully dramatic masks while the story was chanted by two narrators and accompanied by an eight-piece orchestra all playing on traditional instruments. There were a few other traditional dances by the ballerinas all dancing in the most superb costumes and head dress and bare feet. After a short intermission during which the audience retired to the patio overlooking the flood lit lawn, there was more. Hmong hill tribe people performed two simple stunning dances. In one while four people tossed two balls to one another two men playing traditional bamboo flutes which had some parallels with bagpipes not only played but performed the most energetic dances with leaps, convulsions and contortions while never missing a breath of note from their instruments. However this was soon to be upstaged by the final dance. This climaxed with two dancers, a man and a woman, dancing forwards and picking up two earthenware jars each fill of about 16 – 20 litres of water, and then holding these in their teeth and dancing for several minutes without spilling a drop.

After this our dinner seemed under the stars at the Som Chahn seemed remarkably tame. It was a relatively early night although the temptations to explore the street markets were too much for some.



Day 14
Sunday, 23rd January
Luang Prabang
Ban Phanom & Waterfalls
Fearless Leader

Most made the early morning start and went off to Vat Sene, a beautiful temple to make merit. All felt much better for their efforts and sacrifice. After that while Jane and Rick found Lisa's and observed paper making others returned to the guesthouse preparatory to breakfast.



We breakfasted on a delicious bowl of noodles which we watched being prepared at a street café opposite Vat Sene, where we had made merit earlier. During the breakfast we were fascinated by the efforts of the monks opposite to clear a blocked drainpipe. We also managed during and after the meal to farewell the Chiang Khong conservation volunteers who were continuing their networking around Luang Prabang on their bicycles. While there was a language barrier which limited discussion we all appreciated and endorsed their objectives to save this massive river to which we had become so attached.

Then it was a long route following the River Khan. Jak managed to detach himself from the volunteers and joined us. First stop Ban Phanom which was Keo's home village only four kilometres from Luang Prabang. Most tourists are only taken to the retail outlet for the products of this famous weaving village but with the inside Guide we were taken first through the backstreets and able to explore the hive of activity along the riverside. Keo also took us to his home which luckily had two Thai toilets.

- Keo's father was a sculptor who had created all of the nagas at the nearby Wat and who was working on a wooden sculpture as we passed by. (F.L purchased a wooden Buddha he had finished)
- Opposite part of a house was being demolished. There was some suggestion that

it may not have complied with some building code and it would need to be done again properly

- A small group of were lounging on street corner noodling on a guitar youths (as seems to happen worldwide).
- We walked down to the river the Nam Khan and were surprised by the amount of industry there. Opposite there seems to be a large operation using manual tools and small boats and over 100 labourers to quarry sand and gravel from the river.
- Sunday must be “Wash Day” judging by the number of people at the river doing their washing. Interestingly a lot of the washing was being done by boys.
- Ban Phanom (being on the eastern side of the river) is an ethnic Lu village but opposite was a Lao village where many women were busy on the steep banks gardening
- We observed the woven bamboo walls of the houses which hadn’t been noted in any of our Thai villages and also the arrangement for carrying wood.
- The most fascinating stop was watching paper being made. Fibre from a tree (believed to be Mulberry) is extracted after boiling for eight hours. Fibre is spread across a sieve bottom tray placed in a tub of water. Flower petals and fern leaves arranged in patterns on top of this veneer of fibre. Then the tray was lifted from the tub and stood up to dry for a couple of hours in the sun.



Finally we reached the Government shop where at least two dozen women sat patiently with their wares on benches all imploring us to acquire their wares. While there were many willing and able to coopt we couldn’t buy off every stall holder.

Leaving the Store we continued following the Khan further upstream to a point where we walked down to the river and followed a path past young Laos out for a Sunday picnic to reach the tomb of Frenchman Henri Mahout. He was credited with being the first Westerner to see Angkor Wat however his achievements before dying of malaria at Luang Prabang in 1861 were far more considerable. The expedition which he led from the mouth of the Mekong in Vietnam to its source in Tibet last for years and was one of the greatest European explorations of the Nineteenth Century. His achievements were considerable and he deserves to be better known.

Our route back through Ban Phanom passed through an almost continuous Teak plantation all the way into Luang Prabang. These are all of even age and very young, so young that I can’t recall noting them back in 2001. One plot was being tended by Ban Phanom Primary School. It seems that reforestation

of Laos has become a very active and high priority by both the government and the community.

We stopped briefly in Luang Prabang to collect lunch which we put on boards to eat when we arrived at the waterfall.

The 32 kilometre road to the Kuang Si Waterfalls I was almost all dirt and very rough — rougher than Kimberley’s Gibb River Road. Still the slow, jarring journey had compensations of much interesting scenery and villages. We even for a time came again back to the Mekong. There were paddies, hill tribes and more Lu villages.



At the Waterfalls we enjoyed a lunch of large French rolls and fruit in a deserted restaurant before walking through the forest up to the falls. On the way we passed the enclosures of a young tiger and a number of Asian bears which had been rescued from poachers. It was a disturbing reminder of how many species of wildlife are endangered through human activity.

Proceeding on we came to a series of limestone tufa weirs each holding back a small pool of aqua coloured water. The weirs accumulate more limestone from the water flowing over them resulting a series of mini waterfalls in beautiful lush and very scenic settings.

Nearby villagers were harnessing the power of the waterfalls and diverting some of the flow to drive two water-wheels to drive rice pounders. The Kuang Si Waterfall itself was large and dramatic with a surprisingly strong flow. It was yet another pleasant surprise to add to the endless surprises we have experienced during the past 14 days.

Back in Luang Prabang we detoured back to Keo’s sister’s shop to collect the clothing orders left there the day before.

Then it was briefly back to the guesthouse before dashing off to dinner at the Indo China Spirit restaurant. This was chosen because of the playing of traditional music there which was very pleasant. It was also notable for the White

hawk that was tethered to the fence beside our table which proved to be a bit of a distraction.

By mutual consent we abandoned the option of visiting a night-club and instead headed for the night market. We made a leisurely stroll through this market and its now familiar assortments of hand-made crafts back to the Guesthouse.

One of the more ominous events of the day was that Margaret was missing. While we had assumed that she was taking time out whilst we were meandering around the countryside it transpired that she was stricken with a dreadful wog which was soon to strike several of us within the next day or so although not before the final farewells.



Day 15
Monday 24th January
Luang Prabang to Bangkok
Fearless Leader

We had agreed that we would defer breakfast until 10.00 am and have a sort of a brunch to sustain us as we were due at the airport before noon. However there was a scheduled early morning activity, a visit to the Phousi Markets.

The bus drove us out to the Phousi Markets which were huge. Jane said that they were the only markets she had ever seen which were larger than the Victoria Markets. To me the Phousi Markets provided probably one of the richer experiences of the safari because they were colourful and fascinating filled with people aromas and activity. There were the hardware stalls on the outer selling fireplaces, charcoal and bellows in one place, ball bearings spanners and parts for bicycles and motor bikes in another, and hundreds of tuk-tuks songthaus and other vehicles offering rides. Once through this ring of fringing vendors we came to the food stalls. Once again the Asian innovators had a rich variety of gastronomic delights prepared under the most difficult and improvised circumstances. Then inside virtually every item of food one could imagine was on offer except that this time there were no bush animals or rats on offer as I had seen here in 2001. The meat section would never have

passed Australian health inspectors yet there were no flies and it all seemed surprisingly sterile and fresh and almost all being handled only by women. There were not as many flowers as in the Chiang Rai market. Then there was the huge undercover area. Here there were pharmaceuticals, shoes, clothes, perfumes, craft items and craft supplies. (We saw stalls full of many skeins of silk in every hue available for the spinners and weavers). Throughout our explorations of this hub of activity we were never hassled or jostled and everyone was calm, serene (or just joyous) and we never saw any evidence of anger. The 50 minutes we were there seemed to just fly but it gave us a whole new insight into the life in Luang Prabang.

While most were savouring the sights and sounds of the markets the bus had whipped away Shirley and Barbara W for a massage. They came back feeling buoyed up by the pampering they had had. It was Barbara W's first ever massage and she sounded already fully addicted.

After returning to the guesthouse and collecting those who hadn't been with us at the markets we took off for our very late breakfast which was a less than enthusiastic affair because of the sad realization that our wonderful odyssey through this region was about to end. We can't blame the breakfast for the illnesses that were later to beset the majority because those who ate nothing and those who ate the continental breakfast also later became afflicted.

At 11.15 am we returned to the Guesthouse, collected our baggage (and in my case great sheets of paper procured for us by the entrepreneurial Keo before heading to the Airport.

From there was little more to report. Keo and the bus left us outside and we struggled with the procedures inside. Fortunately, getting out of Laos was nowhere near as complicated as it had been entering it. Noi and Dej flew off a little earlier than us on the Thai Airways flight via Chiang Mai and we boarded the Bangkok Airlines flight to the megalopolis of Bangkok. We dispersed at the Bangkok Airport with seven heading off to join the very crowded Qantas flight on to Sydney. We parted happily but sadly within a few hours most would be afflicted by the mysterious ailment.

