

# **AN ASSESSMENT OF INDEPENDENT TOURISTS OR “BACKPACKERS” IN LUANG NAMTHA, LAO PDR**

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## **Introduction**

The Lao PDR is experiencing a rapid expansion in its fledgling tourism industry. The number of visitor arrivals increased from 37,613 in 1991 to 737,208 in 2000. These figures include regional tourists from Vietnam, Thailand and China who are able to obtain border passes in addition to individuals seeking Thai visa extensions. Exclusive of regional tourists and visa extensions, the number of international tourists entering Laos in 2000 was 292,105. The United States (32,869), France (24,534) and Japan (20,687) presently represent the three top long-haul markets.

Data obtained from the Lao National Tourism Authority (NTA) indicates that international tourists primarily visit Laos because of the country's natural and cultural assets. In addition, 28% of international tourists report that they chose to visit Laos because it remained a "new destination". The NTA reports the average international tourist stays for 5 days and spends US\$90 per-day. These data were compiled from a survey of international tourists about to depart the country via Watty International Airport and do not accurately reflect the interests, expenditures and average length-of-stay for the visibly numerous independent travelers or "backpackers" that generally prefer overland transportation. This report was compiled to gain a better understanding of the demographic composition, interests and attitudes this group.

## **Research Site**

Luang Namtha is located in the extreme northwest of Laos, bordering China and Myanmar. Over 85% of the province's 9,325 km<sup>2</sup> are mountainous, with remaining provincial forest cover estimated at 59%. The province is divided into five administrative districts, containing 470 villages, with a total population of 114,741. There are over 20 ethnic groups residing in Luang Namtha making it arguably the most diverse province in the country. Overall, the provincial population distribution relative to the broad ethnic classifications of lowlanders (*Lao loun*) uplanders, (*Lao teung*) and highlanders (*Lao soung*) is balanced at 33%, 29% and 38%, respectively.

The reliability of road and air transportation to the province has improved substantially over the past decade. The 200-km road to Houei Xai links Luang Namtha with northern Thailand, and there is an all weather road to the international border checkpoint at Boten linking the province with Yunnan, China. From the southeast, Luang Namtha is accessible from Luang Prabang (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) via Udomxai province. Lao Aviation operates non-stop round trip flights from Vientiane four times weekly, and there is twice-weekly service from Luang Prabang and Houei Xai. It is also possible to reach Luang Namtha via the Mekong and Namtha Rivers, however this mode of travel is disproportionately expensive, therefore most tourists travel overland by truck or bus.

The number of tourist arrivals to Luang Namtha increased from 4,732 in 1995 to 24,770 in 2000. To accommodate the growing number of visitors many low-cost guesthouses and hotels have

been constructed. Presently there are 19 in Namtha district, 12 in Sing district, 2 in Vieng Phoukha and 4 in Long district. The cost of overnight accommodations ranges from US\$ 1 – 15. These establishments often have attached restaurants serving Lao and some basic western food. Electricity is available only from 6-10 pm daily in Luang Namtha City. In Sing, Vieng Phoukha and Long electricity is also available daily from 6 – 9 pm.

## Methods

Data were obtained from a convenience sample (n=131) of departing international tourists at the main bus terminal in Luang Namtha City. Subjects were asked to self-administer a survey and record their opinion regarding tourism's positive and negative effects on the area, as well as provide suggestions as to how they felt tourism could be improved. All data were obtained using the English language. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS for windows version 7.5.

## Results

Demographic information on the study participants is presented in table 1. The majority of tourists (97%) reported that they traveled overland to reach Luang Namtha, with the most popular entry point being Houi Xai (43%) followed by Vientiane (38%). Houi Xai and Vientiane are also the most popular exit points (43% and 31%, respectively), with Boten a distant third (13%). Both Houei Xai and Vientiane are Thailand-Lao immigration checkpoints, while Boten is at the China-Lao frontier. The mean number of days this population spends in Laos is 23 (SD = 8.65) ranging from 2 - 60 days. The average length of stay in the Luang Namtha area is 4 days (SD = 2.1). Mean daily expenditure was US\$ 9, indicating this group will spend an average of US\$207 per-person during their stay in country.

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Table 1. Age, sex and nationality of international tourists in Luang Namtha Province (n =131)

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Age: 27 (mean) 19 - 55 (range)

Sex: male 55%

Country of origin:

Austria	2.3 %
Australia	6.1
Belgium	2.3
Canada	9.2
Denmark	2.3
England/UK	13.0
France	5.3
Germany	3.8
Israel	12.3
Italy	2.3
Japan	11.5
Netherlands	10.7
Norway	3.8
New Zealand	.8
Poland	1.5
Switzerland	3.8
Sweden	2.3
Thailand	.8
USA	4.6
Other	1.5

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As previously mentioned, Luang Namtha possesses a pristine natural environment and diverse population of ethnic minorities. As shown in table 2, these two assets are the major factors influencing tourists to visit the province.

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Table 2. Tourist's main reasons for visiting Luang Namtha (n=131)

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Ethnic minorities	67.9%
Nature	66.0
Culture	50.4
New destination	43.5
Handicrafts	15.3
Other	13.0
Food	11.5
Monuments & Museums	6.1

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### ***Visits to Minority Villages***

A substantial percentage of tourists are visiting ethnic minority villages, with 55% of our population reporting they had or planned to visit a village. The most frequently visited ethnic groups are the Akha, Yao, Khmu and Lantaen. The number of tourists that visit minority villages is set to increase with the establishment of trekking and guide services in Luang Namtha and Sing District.

### ***Handicrafts***

Table 2 shows that 15.3% of tourists expressed an interest in the region's handicrafts. The most popular items are textiles, jewelry and clothing. In Namtha and Sing District, Tai Dam women produce and sell textiles and clothing. Among women mainly sell embroidery, small handbags and some clothing, and Akha women sell reproductions of traditional silver jewelry (made from recycled soft-drink cans) beaded necklaces and bracelets, Akha head-dress and some clothing. The Lantaen ethnic group is renowned for producing high quality bamboo paper and indigo-dyed clothing.

### ***Trekking and River Trips to the Nam Ha NPA***

The Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA) is a 222,400-hectare<sup>2</sup> protected area containing diverse flora and fauna, in addition to a number of minority villages within its boundaries. If properly managed, ecotourism can contribute to cultural and natural heritage protection and rural development, but the broad scope of that discussion is not this study's intention. Tourist's interests in overnight trekking trips to the NPA with a trained local guide were assessed, however, and it was found 74% would participate if available. When asked about guided river trips to the NPA 82% expressed interest, confirming a significant market exists for ecotourism activities in Luang Namtha. Surprisingly, although there was a high level of interest in visiting the Nam Ha NPA, only 35% of the sample population had ever heard of the protected area.

### ***Tourism's Effects on Luang Namtha***

Although tourists themselves, 21% of our sample felt tourism was having a negative effect on the area. The percentage of tourists who thought tourism was having positive or mixed effects was 55% and 24%, respectively. The economic benefit of tourism was the main reason it was seen as positive, however many thought the influx of money was "changing peoples traditional way of

life" and perceived the increasing tourism revenue as negative. In addition, respondents felt that tourism was causing adverse effects on the local culture (loss of cultural identity) begging, the "human zoo effect", and commercialization of culture. Conversely, a small number of tourists perceived contact with tourists as an opportunity for locals to engage in cultural exchange with foreigners on a level not previously attainable. Further to this concept, two tourists wrote that the sudden interest in traditional cultures would help stimulate their preservation. A small percentage of the sample wrote that the growing number of tourists and tourism revenue could stimulate infrastructure improvements. The most alarming negative effect reported was the proliferation of "drug tourism" and availability of opium in Sing District.

### ***Suggestions for Improving Tourism in Luang Namtha***

The survey's final question asked, "what can be done to improve tourism in the Luang Namtha area?" There were only slight variations on recurring subjects. The main subjects are categorized and listed below in order of most to least frequently cited:

- improve transportation and infrastructure
- more and better information
- better accommodations
- remove trash
- preserve Lao culture
- don't do anything
- more English spoken by tourism providers
- permit village visits only with licensed guides
- allow bicycle rentals in Muang Sing
- involve villagers
- educate hilltribes about tourist's expectations
- direct tourism tax revenue to health and education
- construct a handicraft market
- do not improve transportation

The suggestions above focus on two main concepts; (1) improving logistic and physical comforts for the visitor and (2) the desire to mitigate perceived and actual threats to the natural and cultural heritage of the region. A Danish woman writes:

"We - the foreigners - have to learn the language, culture, people, country and more about everything here in Laos so we can understand, accept, help and not spoil your people and country by our visits. I hope you won't make the hilltribes to be your moneymakers. Try to teach them a bit about us and our culture. Don't make them think and expect that tourists are just money for them. This will not be good for either them or us."

### **Discussion**

This study was conducted in order to examine the demographic composition, attitudes and interests of international tourists visiting Luang Namtha, Lao PDR. As far as the author knows, this is the first time an assessment of this nature has been conducted in Luang Namtha Province. Possibilities for bias exist in that survey data were obtained using the English language. However, recurring suggestions for improving tourism are similar across the wide variation of countries of origin, including countries where English is not commonly spoken. In the sample population mean daily expenditure is only US\$ 9. One can certainly subsist on this amount, however, the

author suspects that subjects estimated their daily costs exclusive of visa fees and possibly some transportation costs. A high percentage of the economic benefits of this seemingly small daily expenditure directly benefits mostly Lao owned businesses, as this group is lodging and eating in locally owned establishments and purchasing local goods and services.

## **Conclusion**

This study represents a first step in assessing the overall situation regarding tourism in Luang Namtha, Lao PDR. Presently a substantial number of international tourists are utilizing overland transportation to reach the province, primarily interested in the province's natural and cultural heritage. Luang Namtha is mainly accessed via Houi Xai in neighboring Bokeo province, followed by the Vientiane - Luang Prabang - Oudomxai - Luang Namtha route, which is also part of a larger circuit linking Northeast Thailand (Nong Khai), central and northern Laos, and Northern Thailand (Chiang Rai). Expansion of the tourism sector is resulting in both positive and negative effects, with the most visible negative effects appearing in Sing District. If current trends continue, the number of international tourists will continue to increase, putting additional strain on the regions cultural and natural resources. In order to mitigate erosion of the very assets that make this region so attractive, it is recommended a management plan is created and operational regulations enforced to ensure the protection of Luang Namtha's precious natural and cultural heritage.