

Take the Lao road

One of the world's poorest countries, Laos has opened up to the economic rewards of tourism following years of Communist-inspired isolation. Now, a UNESCO-supported ecotourism project – in which visitors trek through lush landscapes to experience the biodiversity and cultural traditions of the country's far north – is benefitting the region's broad mix of ethnic peoples, writes **Amar Grover**

At dusk, one of our group comes rushing outside to announce that there's a snake curled up by his bed. The two guides dash inside the lodge, then one runs to fetch the village headman. He appears with a bamboo stick, spears the unlucky serpent – a vivid green specimen about a metre and a half long – and takes it away. 'Poisonous,' announces Phone, our lead guide, 'but not deadly.' The headman seems embarrassed and says it has never happened before. We reassure him that it's of little concern, inwardly rather pleased at this minor drama, although disconcerted by the snake's fate.

We're in Laos's Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA), a 2,224-square-kilometre tract of dense forest that cloaks the steep hills of the northwestern province of Luang Namtha, close to the borders with China and Myanmar. The trek we're on forms part of the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project. Set up in 2001, and supported principally by UNESCO, the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) and the governments of New Zealand and Japan, the project has since won a Tourism for Tomorrow Awards commendation and was shortlisted for the Equator Prize for success in reducing poverty through conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

The project's goal is to implement economically viable, sustainable community-based ecotourism initiatives that help to alleviate poverty in the region and to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of Luang Namtha province and the Nam Ha NPA. It's also working to increase the number of women and ethnic minorities from both the public and private sector who are trained in the development and management of community-based ecotourism activities.



Khmu villagers tend their paddies at Ban Nalan. A largely agricultural society, the Khmu are one of the largest ethnic groups in Laos, numbering about 450,000

Notwithstanding the fact that Laos remains one of the world's least-developed countries, it still seems to bask in a quaint mystique framed by decades of Communist-inspired isolation. The north, in particular, remains an alluring region for foreign visitors. Its hills and forests cradle some of Laos's greatest biodiversity with, according to a Wildlife Conservation Society survey, 288 bird species and at least 38 mammals, including elephants, tigers and clouded leopards. It also boasts the highest concentration of ethnic or tribal groups, of which Laos officially has 49.

Tourism is now Laos' second-biggest foreign exchange earner, and the government's official policy is to encourage it generally – and ecotourism in particular. According to Michael Roehrig, the project's guide-training adviser, the Nam Ha model now sets the standard for the country's various community-based tourism programmes.

LOCAL LUNCH

The experience comes easily and inexpensively. We had left Luang Namtha town and driven on a perfect Chinese-made road (built primarily to facilitate the transport of China's exports to Thailand) for about 20 kilometres to a small village before shouldering our packs and heading into the hills. Ban Chaleunsouk village comprises mainly ethnic Khmu people, and we pause briefly by their dinky grain stores, whose stilts have smooth grip-less bamboo leggings or are topped with cornice-like wooden discs – both simple methods to make them rat-proof.

At the village's fringe, we pass a few tattered garments hung from a wooden frame. 'The clothes of sick villagers,' explains Phone, 'hung to make health good again. It's traditional medicine.' Halfway up the ridge, a couple of children carrying bags and satchels come down the trail heading to a valley school for the week; they will return to their village and parents for the weekend. As we hike higher, occasional gaps in the trees lend magnificent views of pristine forest and green hills undulating to the horizon.

Lunch – sticky rice, meat and vegetables spread on enormous leaves – is eaten in a rustic bamboo shelter at the summit before we head down once more, plunging into thick forest. Our guides point out earthen salt licks used by deer, a shrub whose bark shavings stem diarrhoea, and plants that provide natural dyes. We emerge by the clearings of Ban Nalan village in mid-afternoon, leaving us a few hours to explore its surroundings. A rickety bridge crosses the gurgling Nam Ha river and leads to the village's ripening rice paddies.

Dinner is served in a kitchen-dining hut. Candles flickering over a long table, we tuck into several *laap* dishes (minced meats with zesty salads), assorted vegetables and sticky rice – all washed down with thimblefuls of *lào-lào*, the local firewater.



Above left: Lanten children play on bamboo rafts on the Nam Tha river; **Above:** a Lanten woman embroiders a small cloth bag beside her house in the village of Ban Namkoy in the Nam Ha NPA. The small-scale production and sale of handicrafts to passing trekkers makes a contribution to local livelihoods; **Far left:** an Akha infant clings to his brother's back in Sopheo Kao village, near Muang Sing; **Left:** Tai Lue villagers harvest upland rice in the hills near Muang Sing, near the border with China's Yunnan province. Once cloaked in forest, these hills are gradually being turned over to cash crops or even staples such as rice that were previously grown on the valley floor

VILLAGE LIFE

There's no doubt that the project has benefited many local people. About 40 provincial guides (who lead treks from start to finish) and village guides (who assist over short sections) enjoy a seasonal income of up to US\$11 per day, compared with Laos's per capita annual GDP of around US\$600. Last year, around 5,000 visitors undertook eco-treks in the province, with the majority in Nam Ha NPA. Part of the much-needed revenue they brought in goes to a village fund, with village committees deciding how the money should be spent – for example, treating mosquito nets with Permethrin.

However, there is a concern in some quarters that while the poverty-alleviating arm of this project is working, the conservation of Nam Ha's biodiversity and natural resources is suffering due to insufficient resources and staffing. According to Luang Namtha's provincial tourist office, just four per cent of its revenue comes from entrance fees to the NPA, with visitors paying a one-off charge of US\$2.

Next morning, we track the Nam Ha river as far as Ban Namkoy, a village of ethnic Lanten people, where the women wear indigo-dyed cotton smocks and white leggings. The afternoon brings a stiff climb, first through a stream bed and dark mossy forest full of massive, centuries-old *mak koo* trees, then up through a hillside clearing with wispy cotton plants where, according to Phone, opium was grown until around 2000. It was mostly for villagers' personal use, although that hadn't stopped children as young as 14 becoming addicted.

For nearly two decades, the Lao government has clamped down on large-scale opium production. Northern Laos once formed a third of the infamous 'Golden Triangle', and while the area around Luang Namtha never hosted intense production, just 60 kilometres northwest, alongside the Sino-Burmese border, lies Muang Sing district and town, once one of Indochina's opium heartlands.

Vestiges of once widespread 'narco-tourism' linger in the form of aged Akha women who wander the streets hawking their embroidery. 'Opiah', some whisper softly, opening their palms furtively to reveal little wraps of the stuff. Their age, demeanour and apparent poverty almost make the hoped-for transaction seem harmless; however, it seems few visitors these days are here for narcotics.

Of Sino-Tibetan origin, about 80,000 Akha people live in Laos, many in this district. They are among the most striking of Laos's ethnic groups, with a rich if not arcane tapestry of rituals and profound forest knowledge. Many Akha women still wear their traditional headdress of covered bamboo rings decorated with silver baubles and colonial coins, although the custom is disappearing under the bland tailoring of cheap Chinese imports.



Top: trekkers take a simple lunch wrapped in leaves on the trail beyond Muang Sing; **Above:** an Akha villager re-roofs his grain store in the village of Pawai Kao, near Muang Sing. Akha homes are usually of bamboo construction and divided into male and female sides

FROM OPIUM TO RUBBER

Over the next few days, I take in the sights in and around Muang Sing, first making day-hikes into the hills from the main road to China, just ten kilometres away, and then taking a three-day trek organised by the local tourist office.

In a neat reflection of the area's ethnic mix, I come first to a cluster of Yao villages nestled into the foothills. Handsome elderly women with traditional black turbans and thick red stoles patiently embroider clothes and purses, some of which are sold as handicrafts, along with bamboo parchment notebooks.

Deeper into the hills, I pass an Akha village's spirit gates. Commonly decorated with woven rattan fetishes (although you might also see civet cat skulls and skins), these bamboo and wood archways are believed to ward off evil spirits and guard the edges of all Akha settlements. Similar geometric talismans also hang from long arching poles, and outsiders should never touch these items.

For all their ancient customs and beliefs, many Akha communities are changing rapidly. Arguably, their greatest challenge has been the curtailment of large-scale opium production. Traditionally a remedy for ailments and a tolerated, if not de rigueur, indulgence of the elderly, opium was gradually transformed into a valuable cash crop thanks to the commercial greed of colonials and Lao lowlanders.

Now, deprived of a reliable income and encouraged by the government to reduce traditional swidden agriculture (a form of shifting slash-and-burn rice cultivation), descend from the highlands and embrace a more cash-crop-oriented economy, some Akha face new difficulties in adapting to the lowlands. Competition for land (for paddy rice, sugar cane and rubber) and water render some new villages hardly viable, but these issues aren't immediately obvious to the casual ecotourist.

However, among the terraces of ripening upland rice – the local staple – and loftier stands of forest, you can't fail to notice the expanding Chinese-backed rubber plantations. It takes around five to seven years from planting to the first latex harvest, so many young plants have yet to produce any revenue. Practically, this means that the rubber business tends to benefit wealthier families and those who grasped the opportunities early.

The plantations are breathing new economic life into the region, but they do have their detractors. A 2006 National University of Laos case study suggested that rubber is distorting traditional attitudes to the use of swiddens as communal land, occasionally leading to inter-village tension and disputes, and leaving communities potentially exposed to both fluctuations in the rubber price and regional labour shortages.

Above all, there are concerns that forests – even those of the Nam Ha NPA – are threatened simply by rubber's projected financial returns.

However, Steven Schipani, UNESCO regional ecotourism advisor to the project, questions the almost blind economic faith in rubber, warning that ecotourism and plantations can't both thrive in the same immediate areas. He points out that research has shown that ecotourism can earn more than rubber while maintaining biodiversity and local stewardship of the land.

GOING FURTHER

Beyond the Nam Ha NPA boundaries, Muang Sing's treks have fewer takers than those at Luang Namtha. Although tourism (much of it opium-driven) arrived here much earlier, the adoption of the Nam Ha eco-guide model came later.

My trek here proves a rather earthier experience. Starting along a level trail from Seuadaeng – a new village of Akha people who have come down from the hills and whose children now have their own little school – we're soon climbing a tiny path that wriggles up and down a series of damp, jungle-clad ridges.

Our lodgings that night – a simple Akha-style house on stilts with a split-bamboo floor and woven walls – lies on the edge of Sopee Kao village. The settlement has a single communal tap, and women thresh rice by pushing their feet on the end of a pivoted wooden beam whose head pounds a large mortar.

Despite the presence of some forlorn and recently abandoned houses, around 70 people remain to enjoy some unexpected luck; the village is now growing organic tea for the Chinese market. Just that afternoon, their buyers had come in a 4x4 and taken away nearly 80 kilograms. In a sign of emerging prosperity as faint as the light they provide, some residents now have small (Chinese-made) hydroelectric generators to power energy-efficient bulbs.

The next day, we hike for around six hours to Pawai Kao village, mainly following the contours and ridgelines of the upper hills. Mist obscures the view to the plains, but the gloomy atmosphere is quickly dispelled by the lively inhabitants of what proves to be quite a large village. A crowd keenly watches as a small pig is slaughtered for our dinner, its hair burnt and scraped off over a fire. At least 15 hearty local men pile into the trekkers' lodge to smoke cigarettes, drink *lào-lào* and chat until the early hours.

In the morning, a broad descending trail leads us past clusters of villagers harvesting their upland rice on steep terraces. Women with sacks of grain – each reputedly weighing up to 50 kilograms – secured by wooden shoulder braces make their way slowly back up the hill. Down on the plains by Laosee village, sugarcane fields stretch into the distance. 'It's now like this,' gestures our guide. Echoing the aspirations of many in the region, he continues: 'Why just grow rice when you can grow cane and make money to buy rice?' **G**



Co-ordinates | Laos



When to go

Laos has a tropical climate with two seasons: dry (October–April, although the latter two months form a third, noticeably hotter 'season') and rainy (May–September). It's generally hot and humid all year round, but the best time to visit is between November and April.

Getting there

Amar Grover visited Laos with Hands Up Holidays (www.handsupholidays.com, 020 7193 1062), which specialises in combining community-development volunteering work with a sightseeing holiday. It's currently running volunteering projects at schools in Udomxai (near Luang Namtha) and Luang Prabang.

Further information

Trekking costs in the Nam Ha NPA and near Muang Sing depend on the duration and the number of people signing up for the trek. Typical costs for local tourist-office-run treks vary from around 360,000 kip (about £21) per person for a group of eight on a two-day trek to 1,020,000 kip (£60) per person for a group of two on a four-day trek. The main private operators, Green Discovery (www.greendiscoverylaos.com) and Exotissimo (www.exotissimo.com), tend to charge a little more.