

THE Daily Telegraph escape

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ANGELA SAURINE fell for a monk, but there was no monkey business

Falling for a former monk was not something I had anticipated, but it was hard not to be taken with Somdy's charms. After all, it's not every day you meet someone who has spent time in jail for their humanitarian deeds. He'd grown up in the kind of village you see in those World Vision ads, and moved to a temple aged just 10. He spent 12 years in orange robes, but as the eldest of eight children he was forced to give up his beloved lifestyle to help support his family. While studying at university he worked in a range of jobs at a hotel, learning skills such as cooking — which proved invaluable later on when he began leading trekking tours in the Laos hills. It is 150km — or about seven hours — by slow boat down the Mekong River from Huay Xai to Pakbeng, but that's not how Lao people measure it. Instead they refer to it as "eight candles", because that's how many burn in the time it takes.

Tiny wooden huts dot the rice and corn fields we pass, the only sounds the soft purr of the motor, the curtains flapping in the breeze and water lapping against the side of the boat.

Somdy regularly donates medicine, books and pens to villages along the river and they open their arms to him and anyone he brings to visit. When expectant mothers in one village near the Chinese border were having trouble delivering their babies, he organised for an American friend to send a pair of forceps.

Ninety-two children attend the Ban Houay Sae village school and it seems every one of them is waiting to meet us. Dressed in scruffy, oversized T-shirts bought from the markets, the children appear shy but curious.

Somdy is free to roam the village freely, acting as translator whenever we want to speak to one of the 300 self-sufficient Kamu tribe members who live there. Chilli and tobacco are spread out to dry in the sun in baskets, while pigs and goats wander around undisturbed. Girls in this village usually marry at about 15 and have four or five children.

Somdy tells us it used to be more, but a few years ago UNICEF began supplying condoms.

UNICEF also visits one day a year to vaccinate for polio and measles, and it's the day we visit. It's nice to see money possibly donated in Australia put to work.

The rolling green hills give way to limestone cliffs as we approach the trading port of Pakbeng later in the day. There is no electricity or hot water here — instead, power comes from generators from dusk until 10pm.

Despite this, all the huts have old TVs, with large satellite dishes. The night markets are the perfect place to pick up a delicacy — if you can stomach hairy water buffalo skin that's used to make soup. As we approach the end of our second full day ambling down the river, we pull in to visit the Pak Ou cave, hidden among the limestone cliffs. There are two to explore, with thousands of Buddhist statues propped inside like toy soldiers.

You have to be up at the crack of dawn to see it, but watching the monks collecting alms in the UNESCO World Heritage-listed town Luang Prabang is definitely worth it.

A seemingly endless line of robed men march single file down the street as locals sitting on mats place a small amount of sticky rice from their baskets into the monks' baskets.

A plethora of colourful fruit and vegetables line the street, a live squirrel sits in a basket with a large bladed knife beside it, and there are also groups of live frogs, deer hooves and a plastic bag full of live crickets on offer. After spending the previous few days looking at the muddy Mekong, the turquoise water of the swimming holes at Kuang Si waterfall are a welcome sight. It is a one-hour tuk-tuk ride then another hour-long trek to get to the falls.

The next morning we cross the river once again to visit a pottery village and make a surprise appearance at a local school, one of Somdy's many charity recipients. A teacher enthusiastically invites us into a classroom, where pupils learn about a native flower.

Somdy asks for a volunteer to write the English alphabet on the chalk board and recite it, and much to the children's delight I happily oblige. Peering out the French window of the Joma bakery back in Luang Prabang that night, I watch monks playfully piggybacking each other after their evening prayers.

Patience is one quality needed on any trip to Laos — and a sense of humour doesn't go astray. Meals can arrive an hour apart.

Somdy has shown me a country with more surprises than I could have imagined. But with his plans to return to his life as a monk, it seems my crush will remain just that.

Loving Laos



NEED TO KNOW

Getting there: Thai Airways International, Qantas or British Airways to Bangkok where the tour begins. Singapore Airlines to Bangkok via Singapore.

Tour: Geckos has a 14-day Highlights of Laos trip.

Price: \$995 per person

Activities: includes kayaking, tubing, caving, cycling, swimming.

More information: geckosadventures.com or visit-laos.com

Pictures: ANGELA SAURINE