

NEX STOP: WHO KNOWS?

By Bonnie Munday

I recently read that a new high-speed train route had opened in Laos at the end of 2021. The Lao-China Railway can get you the 150 kilometers from the ancient capital of Luang Prabang north to the Chinese border in just 90 minutes. It carries more than 1.5 million passengers a year, a game-changer for a country with very little transport infrastructure. As someone who has visited this remote corner of Laos, I wondered: what fun is that sort of speed when you can take three days to do pretty much the same trip by boat – never knowing if you’ll actually get there?

It was the spring of 2017, and my husband, Jules, and I had just spent two weeks travelling around Laos. We had poked around the humid, sprawling capital, Vientiane, in the south and explored the fascinating Plain of Jars in the middle of the country. We were really enjoying it – the people were kind, and it wasn’t as touristy as we knew Vietnam, the country we planned to visit next, would be. We saved Luang Prabang, Laos’s historic former capital, for last. Located at the confluence of the Mekong and the Nham Khan rivers, the UNESCO World Heritage Site was quiet, with several gilded Buddhist monasteries. Its well-preserved French colonial buildings date back to the first half of the 20th century, when Laos was part of French Indochina. We strolled the peaceful back streets and colourful craft markets and climbed Phousi Hill to take in the view. Relaxing at a bistro across from a wat (Buddhist temple), we watched saffron-robed monks stroll by as we enjoyed coffee and croissants, another vestige of France’s colonial regime. At a bamboo-stilted riverfront cafe we ate traditional Lao *larb* – spicy ground pork or chicken mixed with fresh seasonings – served with the refreshing local brew, the rice-based Beerlao.

As the sun sank on the Mekong River, we watched multicolored longboats glide by while the breeze carried the deep, soft sounds of the wats’ gongs. I couldn’t think of a more serene place to spend our final days in Laos. Then things took a sharp turn. Walking down Luang Prabang’s main drag on our second-last day, Jules spotted a trekking outfitter that offered a multi-day hike among the Akha hill tribes outside the small city of Phongsali. It would mean travelling to the mountainous frontier area near Laos’s northern border with China and Vietnam. Jules and I had talked about visiting the area once we got to Vietnam. We had seen photos of Akha women wearing silver-beaded headdresses, and we were intrigued by the fact that the ethnic minority Akha people, along with other tribes living in the mountainous regions of Laos, Myanmar, China and Vietnam, had managed to maintain their traditional way of life.

But we’d been having second thoughts. Though numerous tour companies ran treks to the Akha villages in Vietnam, we weren’t big fans of overly planned group tours. Maybe a hike to the Akha villages in less-touristy Laos, just the two of us with a guide, would be more our style. “Let’s not go to Vietnam yet,” Jules said. “We should see more of Laos.” I liked the idea, but I needed to know how we’d get to northern Laos before committing to it. Phongsali was so far away and the roads weren’t great. Our *Lonely Planet* guidebook had very little information about that part of the country. Maybe we could go by plane? At the local tourism office we were told that Lao Airlines did not fly there at that time of year because of thick smoke: it was ‘burning season’ in central Laos, when farmers torch their fields ahead of planting. We could catch a bus, but it would take 15 hours, much of it on mountainous switchbacks. What were worse, reviews on Trip- Advisor had tales of the bus drivers falling asleep at the wheel. That didn’t sound like much fun.