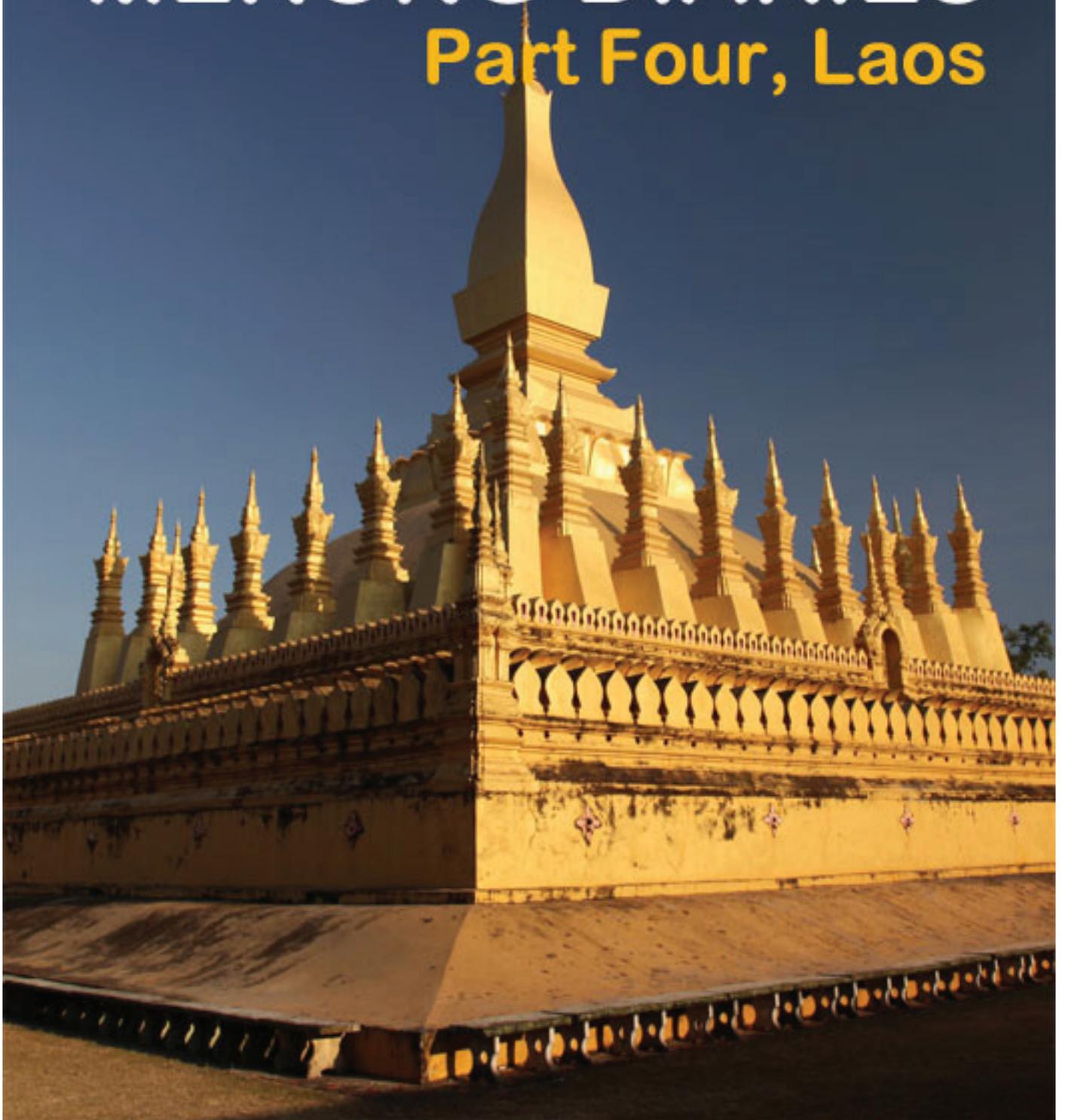


MEKONG DIARIES

Part Four, Laos



Day 43 – Entering Laos

Today we fly to Vientiane and find it a quaint and quiet little town next to the Mekong. Along the river in the center of town, earthworks and machinery are transforming the shoreline. A large sign announces that this is a project designed to protect Vientiane against a flood like the one that occurred last year, when only a unified effort prevented the whole city from being inundated. We also discover that the city has some really good restaurants.



Colonial architecture in Thailand looms over the Mekong river near Vientiane.

Days 44-45 – Meetings with Officials

After a breakfast of sublime French pastry, a tasty reminder of the colonial era, we meet our government minder, a press officer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We hand over almost every penny we have to gain the various permissions required to shoot in Laos, and are then off to meet the kind people of the World Wildlife Foundation.

Marc, the head of the WFF in Laos, and his colleagues Trang and Roger take us to a monastery an hour out of town, where, in an interview, he argues the importance of putting oneself in the shoes of decision-makers before criticizing their development plans for the river. I have noticed how well-made the shoes of decision-makers are in this region compared to their barefoot compatriots, and I wonder about the suffering of the rich and powerful.

Later in the day we visit the offices of the Asian Development Bank to meet the country director, Gill-Hong Kim, a handsome and kindly-looking man. The ADB is a key partner in the country's hydro-electric plans. Gill-Hong points out the key difference in dams for the bank as being between projects on the river's mainstream and projects on its tributaries. It is an interesting distinction, and is one that the bank uses as a nonnegotiable cut-off in assessing which projects it will fund.

At sunset we climb over earthworks along the Mekong's banks next to Vientiane's tourist strip. Last year, the worst floods in 100 years threatened to inundate the city and were only stopped due to the unified efforts of all of its citizens. Now, an internationally backed project is transforming the natural shoreline to protect the city from any such disasters in the future.

The next day, we pick up our Vietnamese visas in preparation for our downstream journey there. Then we meet Aiden Glendinning, public relations manager for the Nam Theun 2 Power Company, the largest infrastructure project in the country's history. Half an hour later, Aiden has convinced us that hydropower is wonderful and that all of its problems have been solved. With his help, we arrange our plans to travel to the Nam Theun 2 Dam and find out for ourselves how the local people are faring in anticipation of the beginning of full-scale operations of the dam in 2010.

Then we cross town to the towering white headquarters of the Mekong River Commission, a body tasked with providing a cooperative forum for the lower Mekong River basin countries as they develop the river and its resources. Upstairs and in the middle of a forest of flags we have set up to provide a backdrop for his interview, CEO Jeremy Bird generously gives us time for a thorough interview in which we attempt to deal with every aspect of the organization's mission.

And in the name of not wasting time, we then visit the Ministry of Energy and Mines, where deputy director Dr. Daovong Phonekeo gives us an interview about the government's hydroelectric strategies. Significantly, he expresses a clear sense that all of the more than 70 dams planned for Laos will actually go ahead at some stage. It is a surprise to discover that the first project planned is also the most contentious—the Don Sahong Dam in the Four Thousand Islands on the border of Cambodia and Laos. Located at the world-famous Khone Falls, of all dams this is perhaps the one most debated, as its effects on fisheries could be disastrous.

We spend the remaining hours of sunlight filming the historical highlights of Vientiane, and then repack in preparation for our journey south in the morning to film the Nam Theun 2 Dam and its effects on villagers.

Days 46-47 – On the Nakai Plateau

We get up at 7:00 a.m. to film along the Mekong banks near Vientiane and soon find local people fishing, and buying from fishermen, along the river. Down on an exposed sandbank, we interview a man who, though employed as a government official, still fishes in the Mekong every day. He tells us that if he doesn't touch the river for even a day, he feels as if something is missing. Then, a few meters upstream, we see a family about to leave in their pickup truck with a soft-shell turtle they have bought from a fisherman. They will put this in their turtle pond, where it will eventually become dinner for someone wanting a delicacy.

In a short time, we have interviewed several people who have homes and businesses on the river.

After lunch, we drive south toward the Nakai Plateau, site of the Nam Theun 2 hydropower dam. As the sun begins to sink, we turn off the main road following the Mekong and drive west between giant volcanic stone towers that cast jagged silhouettes over the landscape of rice paddies. Running alongside the road, twin power lines lead us toward the sheer cliffs of the plateau, which rises hundreds of feet from the flood plains below.

Here in the early darkness, we roll up our windows to block out the thick red dust that is rising from the dirt roads. On either side, company buildings mix with wooden village houses. Pulling up at the Wooden Guest House, we pile out of the van and into our rooms past framed photographs of local people and company workers standing beside the dam's newly opened construction site.



The reservoir of the Nam Theun 2 Dam. This spot is the new location for community businesses. New fishermen, once farmers and forest hunters, now catch fish every morning and sell them to market vendors from Vientiane.

Next morning, after fried eggs and oily coffee of headache-inducing sweetness, we drive around the edge of the plateau, taking our first look at the new reservoir. Only a year ago this land was still dry, but now the water has flooded a long thin area roughly corresponding to the valley cut by the Nam Theun River. It is a confused and wood-strewn waterway, with the leafless hulks of dead forests showing everywhere. On the other side of the road, hundreds of small thickly wooded valleys come to a sudden stop at barrages and weirs created to hold in the reservoir water.

After about an hour, we arrive at our first destination, the Tulong Bridge, where villagers each day unload their catch of fish. We are very surprised to learn that the reservoir is an abundant fishery with dozens of boats landing buckets full of large “snakehead” fish. The man-made lake was recently stocked by the power company as a replacement source of livelihood and income for the villagers who were relocated when the waters rose.

We speak with fishermen and with market sellers who have come all the way from Vientiane, and receive glowing reports of life alongside these new watery plains. Just a year ago, these people were farmers and hunters. One fisherman accepts a small fortune to take us on a ride out onto the lake, where the dead trees look like strange butterflies reflected in the still water.

By afternoon, the sun has burned away the morning cloud cover, and in the heat we visit relocation villages along the shore of the reservoir. More than 6,000 people here have received brand-new large wooden houses to replace their flooded homes. The new villages seem to be happy places with electricity, schools, and health centers, all linked by all-weather roads.

No one here had any of these things before the dam was built, and as we talk to people it seems clear that they genuinely prefer the new to the old. But it is hard to be sure in a country like Laos, where freedom of speech is not a given, that these people are not just telling us what our government minder and translator expect to hear.

In one village, a man mentions having lost 37 buffaloes to the floods after he no longer had enough land to feed them. In a small subsistence village, that is equivalent to a small fortune, and the loss has not been compensated. He is now very worried about being left solely dependent on fish for his livelihood. In the past, families in rural villages would have spread their food security over several activities—farming, hunting, gathering, fishing, keeping buffaloes, and fishing—in order to prevent a local disaster from leading to a sudden loss of their only food source.

We are left wondering what this project will look like in a few years when the blush of its newness has worn away. For now, village children play in the tree-strewn lake, and tree trunks glow in the golden sunset. We take photographs and drive back to the guesthouse to rest for a trip downstream in the morning.

Day 48 – Mixed Blessings

This morning we drive down off the Nakai Plateau, slowly snaking our way along the side of the cliffs to reach the infrastructure that makes the reservoir such a powerful source of income. At the base of the cliffs, a wide white pumping station sits idle, waiting for the dam to begin operations early in 2010. The water now flowing out of the pumping station is lifeless and translucent green.

Farther down the road, we stop at a small dam built to hold the retaining reservoir. We are able to walk along the top of the concrete structure and look down at the raging spray of white water being released to flow through a man-made canal toward the Xebang Fai River some 30 km away. Even a small dam like this one generates an impressive torrent of water.

We continue away from the dam and follow the power lines—a larger one for Thailand and a smaller one for domestic uses. Our first destination is the village located nearest to the junction of the Nam Theun 2 canal and the Xebang Fai River. Our government guide, who is proving both friendly and extremely helpful, fails to live up to our expectations of oppression and censorship and helps to direct our driver to a small and picturesque village, where we are able to interview a few people.

One older couple speaks to us about the benefits of the dam, but also mentions the loss of river-side farms. These were the area's richest lands, and their loss necessitates the introduction of new chemical fertilizers into the food chain, which adds to the pollution of the river downstream. It also further harms the villagers' limited or nonexistent flow of income.

The couple also says that some of the livelihood-replacement schemes paid for by a revolving village fund set up by the power company have failed. The result of this, as reported by International Rivers, is that villagers are accumulating a debt that requires their selling off cattle or rice crops, leaving them worse off than before.

But it is not these concerns that dominate the old people's remarks. Rather, they mention the company's attentions and engagements, its provision of training and support, the cheap electricity that now flows through the town, and the good roads that now link them to a national economic life that was previously out of reach.

Walking a few minutes through a searing wet heat, we follow brand-new flood warning signs placed along a narrow footpath leading to the Xebang Fai River and then upstream to the canal. We take some time to take a few shots of the water and a small modern vehicular bridge built over the

canal. At the mouth of the canal, small fish surf the mild current, suggesting that at least this far downstream the water coming out of the dam is able to support life.



More than 6,400 families were relocated to make way for the Nam Theun 2 Dam. Although well compensated with new villages, larger houses, health care, and schools, the villagers are still struggling to replace their livelihoods.

At the next village farther downstream, a group of women sitting on a horizontal tree in the shade beside the river are less positive about the dam and the efforts made to compensate them. Before the camera can roll, they list a range of complaints, including: no compensation, even though this has been promised; changes in the water flows that occur without warning; the loss of their riverbank farms; and the assignment of replacement land of unequal value.

But the women's willingness to talk to us dries up as soon as we suggest an interview. This is clearly a case of their being worried about speaking publicly against the dam, and suggests further that our interviews so far were probably at least slightly biased due to the internal political realities of Laos.

At the next village, a hearty man with a large house and signs of success evident all around gives us a long and apparently honest interview. He says it is too soon to predict the dam's impacts, as the water has yet to be released in its full amounts into the Xebang Fai River. However, while he expresses his trust in the government—a sentiment that can be partly explained as a wise hedge against any slightly negative comments he might make—he does raise the issue of compensation for the loss of a complete and healthy river ecosystem.

In terms of hygiene alone, he says that the few hand-pump wells built by the company are not enough for the village's water needs, and in no way replace the river as water for drinking, bathing, agriculture, and fishing. It seems that the farther we travel downstream, the fewer resources are being

made available to offset the impacts of the dam.

While this may seem appropriate, the impacts of dams are often most significant downstream, where the flooding of farms and village land can lead to dramatic costs for subsistence villagers. This means that in the lands along the Xebang Fai River, more than 100,000 people will find out in early 2010 what the real impacts of the Nam Theun 2 project will be when the dam begins generating at full capacity, releasing large amounts of water into their ancestral river.

As the sun starts to dim, we drive away from the river, past the volcanic towers and villages, and toward the Mekong River. For people living along the Mekong, the indirect impact of the Nam Theun 2 Dam could be a rise in nutrients and pollution as villagers use more fertilizer. There could also be a loss of fish habitats. But it is impossible to know for sure what the costs, large or small, will be in this gamble for the development of a nation that undoubtedly needs to raise its people's living conditions.

At the town of Takek we decide to keep the fun going by taking a 15-hour bus drive south toward the Khone Falls instead of resting for the night in what would probably be an unprepossessing guesthouse.

After what seems like a lifetime of discomfort and noisy people in the dark, the sun rises and the world begins to heat up. We are dropped at the side of the road, and we all climb into a local taxi truck and get well shaken for about 30 minutes until we arrive at a small port beside the Mekong. Here, a constant stream of boats is unloading fish and other goods. We catch a boat taxi to an island close to the Khone Falls, find a guesthouse, and fall into bed for the hottest part of the day. At 4 p.m. we wake up to film the sunset over the nearby rapids before returning to our beds for an early night.

Day 49 – The Khone Falls

Before the day even really starts, we find ourselves running behind when our alarms fail to dislodge the claws of sleep. At the guesthouse's little café, our guide and a local fisherman sit waiting for the big lazy "tourists." Undeterred from our need to eat, we consume a generic guesthouse breakfast—strange ham/bacon, fried eggs, and not-bread. Then we all pile into the fisherman's longtail boat and head downstream through the crisscrossing currents and past islands and islets toward the Khone Falls.

Even in the early morning, the temperature rises uncomfortably fast, and with no roof on the boat we are soon cooking nicely as we skim through broiling convections of brown water, past tugging tree tops drowned in the wet-season floods, and inexorably toward a wide misty cataract that appears ahead as a slight depression on the river's flat surface: the Khone Falls.

The tangled downstream pull of the river takes on a whole new vitality and significance the closer we draw to the rising vapor of millions of tons of water being flung onto substrata boulders and churned through giant rapids. Perhaps a kilometer upstream, our captain crosses to the port-side riverbank, continues on for a little while, and then puts us ashore a few hundred meters short of the falls and a secondary channel that runs around the island to their left.

We then lug all of our gear along a searing tar road, thoughtfully cleared of any overhanging foliage that might have provided a moment of shade, to the tourist lookout that faces the falls.

These are the only waterfalls along the entire length of the Lower Mekong River, their "Four Thousand Islands" a striking interruption in the river's course. The Khone Falls are the most spectacular of all—a gigantic jumble of rock and water roaring in one of the world's greatest rivers as it breaks over the very bones of the earth.

We spend hours clambering foolishly over wet rocks under the pretense of needing another angle from which to photograph the cataclysm, but in reality we are driven simply by the magnificent and

beautiful watery violence of the scene. In the heat and humidity we are quickly drenched in sweat, some of us more than others, and by the time we return to the lookout it is clearly time for a lunch break.



The Khone Falls, part of the Four Thousand Island system in Southern Laos, where the entire Mekong River is broken into channels and waterfalls.

At an open-air restaurant, the most disheveled of us take the chance to wash out and dry our shirts while consuming a lunch of catfish larb—a kind of meat salad, a national dish—along with papaya salad and shots of whiskey cured with an unknown traditional medicinal concoction. Then, with our shirts crispy dry after only 20 minutes in the sun, we walk back to the boat, and the fisherman takes us to his own island, Don Sahong, where we arrange to hire motor scooters for a drive to Hue Sahong, the proposed site of the most contentious hydroelectric project on the Lower Mekong River.

At the channel, the fisherman shows us the man-sized wooden fish traps with complex ramps and gates that have been built semisubmerged on the sides of the channel and on rocky reefs out in the stream. This channel, a few hundred meters at its widest, is the deepest year-round link connecting the river above and below the falls and the fish born in Cambodia with their habitats upstream in northern Laos and Thailand.

Though this is an attractive hydropower project and easy to build, its costs could be the devastation of the river's ecosystems and its fish, the largest numbers of which are migratory species that must travel throughout the river system to spawn, mature, and inhabit different ecological niches during their life cycles. When we spoke to the Lao government in Vientiane, it was a surprise to hear that this project is considered to be the most likely mainstream dam to go ahead soon.

The fisherman shows us around the traps and gives us an interview in which he expresses a de-

sire to see the dam go ahead, as his life will gain electricity and the benefits of development. It is hard not to feel confused by his eager embrace of the destruction of the beautiful and abundant natural world that sustains his life. Perhaps the concerns of the educated outsider, the Western do-gooder, are always overly influenced by a misguided pastoral belief in the virtue of nature and a life lived close to the earth.

And then again, maybe the perspective of a villager with no schooling who lives from fishing and farming can provide no real insight into the costs resulting from the destruction of the natural environment and its ecosystems.

Riding back, we stop in the golden light at the end of a hot day to film villagers harvesting their rice fields. Dried rice stalks carpet the land in well-ordered paddies lined with raised green ridges between the palms and field huts. Returning to the river, we wash in it as the water turns purple and gold, reflecting the sky.

The fisherman prepares the ground floor of his house, and as soon as the sun sets, everything in the village is dark, with small flame torches and candles seen floating along pitch-black pathways. The family makes us an amazing dinner of duck larb and chicken sour soup, washed down with fine rice wine infused with fish kidneys and blood pudding.

Watching them labor over our dinner with their work lit only by flickering flames, it is not hard to see why these people might hope for the coming of electricity.

Day 50 – A Garden Island

We sleep really well, even on the flat wooden beds provided by our host. Over time, one's body starts to really like the physical stretching and rest provided by a hard bed. Before the sun has even started to rise, we walk down to the river and set up a camera to record the sunrise. Villagers come down to the river to cast hand nets and to collect water and bathe.

Just as the sky begins to drain of color, we board the fisherman's boat and head downstream.

In the soft early light, narrow boats make slight ripples as they ply the currents, ducking behind clumps of submerged vegetation to pause in the eddies. By the time the sky sheds the rosy sunrise for a cloudless high blue, we are sliding toward the plume of the Khone Falls. This time we do not turn away but head directly toward the falls themselves, turning slightly to the right at the last minute and taking a small previously hidden channel that brings us past the point of no return and into a quiet narrow stream. Then, with a practiced flourish, the fisherman turns his longtail boat on its head and pulls alongside a well-worn shore landing.

Disembarking, we discover we have arrived on a garden island that is shared by a community of local fishermen and is home to a single woman, an ex-Buddhist nun whose apparent love affair with flowers has transformed the pathways into floral rainbows. Colorful wild flowers have been planted in abundance everywhere, even climbing over the doors and windows of the few small huts that dot the pathway.

The fisherman leads us along the smooth path, and soon we come out again to meet the small channel a few hundred meters downstream. A jumble of large rocks turns the stream into white water, and using these rocks as their foundation, a complex of bamboo traps and ramps effectively fills the river. The fisherman quickly takes off his shoes and steps into a small rush of white water, casting his hand net and just as quickly retrieving a silver-skinned fish as long as his forearm.

A few minutes later, a couple of other fishermen turn up, each man going to his own fish ramp or basket trap. Each trap is the sole possession of its owner, with the rights to each being bought, sold,

and inherited along with all normal property rights. This is not the migration season, and no fish are jumping up the ramps. The few that the fishermen catch will go only to feeding their families for that day.



Fishermen brave the strong currents in the small channels running through this unique part of the Mekong River. Complex fishing traps made of bamboo and rattan are scattered all through the rapids.

Still, as a constant day-in-day-out source of fresh nutrients even in the off-season, these traps and rapids are irreplaceable supplies of food for the millions of Laotians living within the Mekong Basin. A young man then walks around the corner, and we learn he is conducting a fish survey for the government. Speaking to us, he stresses the important of these fish.

Our visit in this very special place finished, the fisherman boats us back to the guesthouse. From there, we take boats and buses to the border and say goodbye to our kind guide and the country of Laos. Hello, Cambodia!