

Sabai-dee, Falang! Encounters of Kindness on the Lao Roads



Leana Niemand

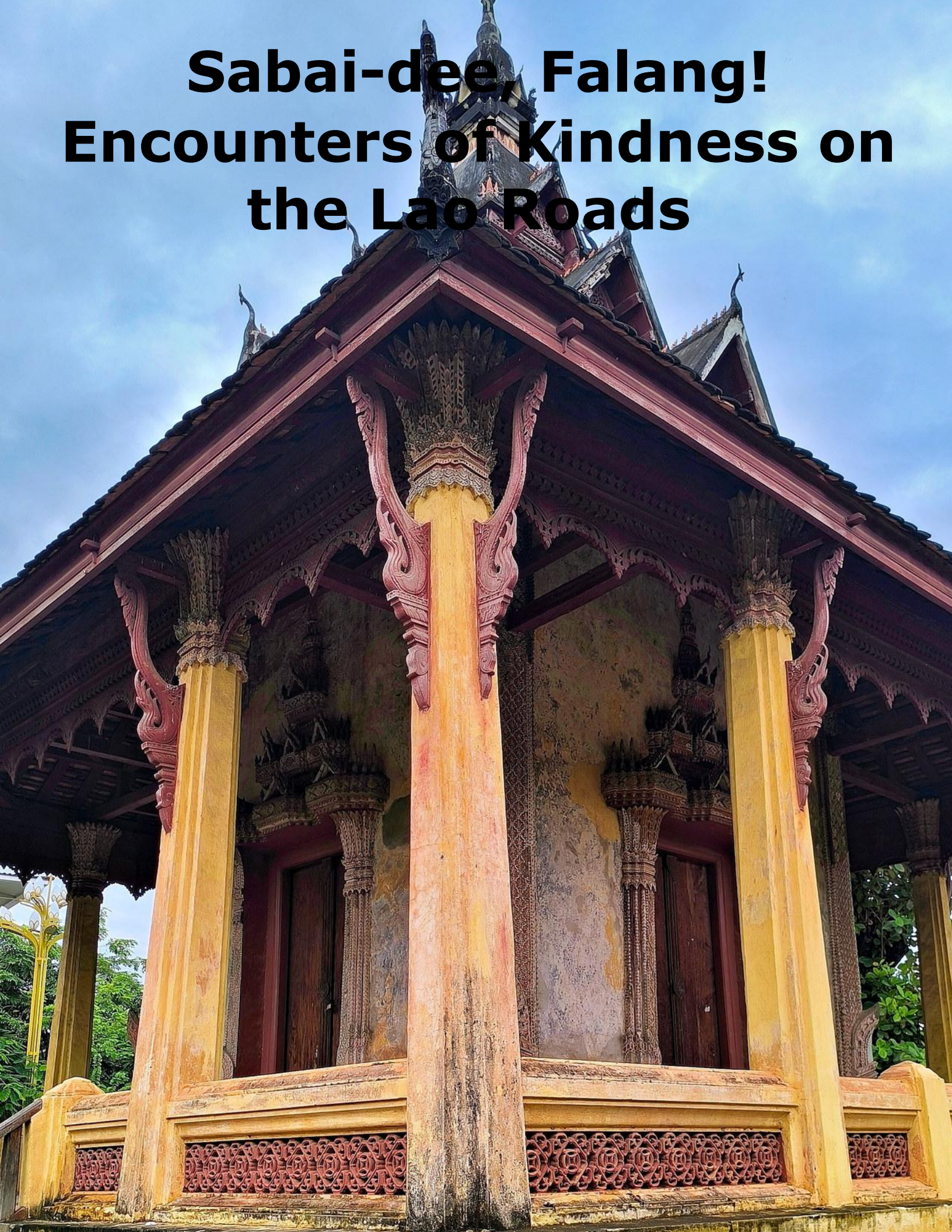
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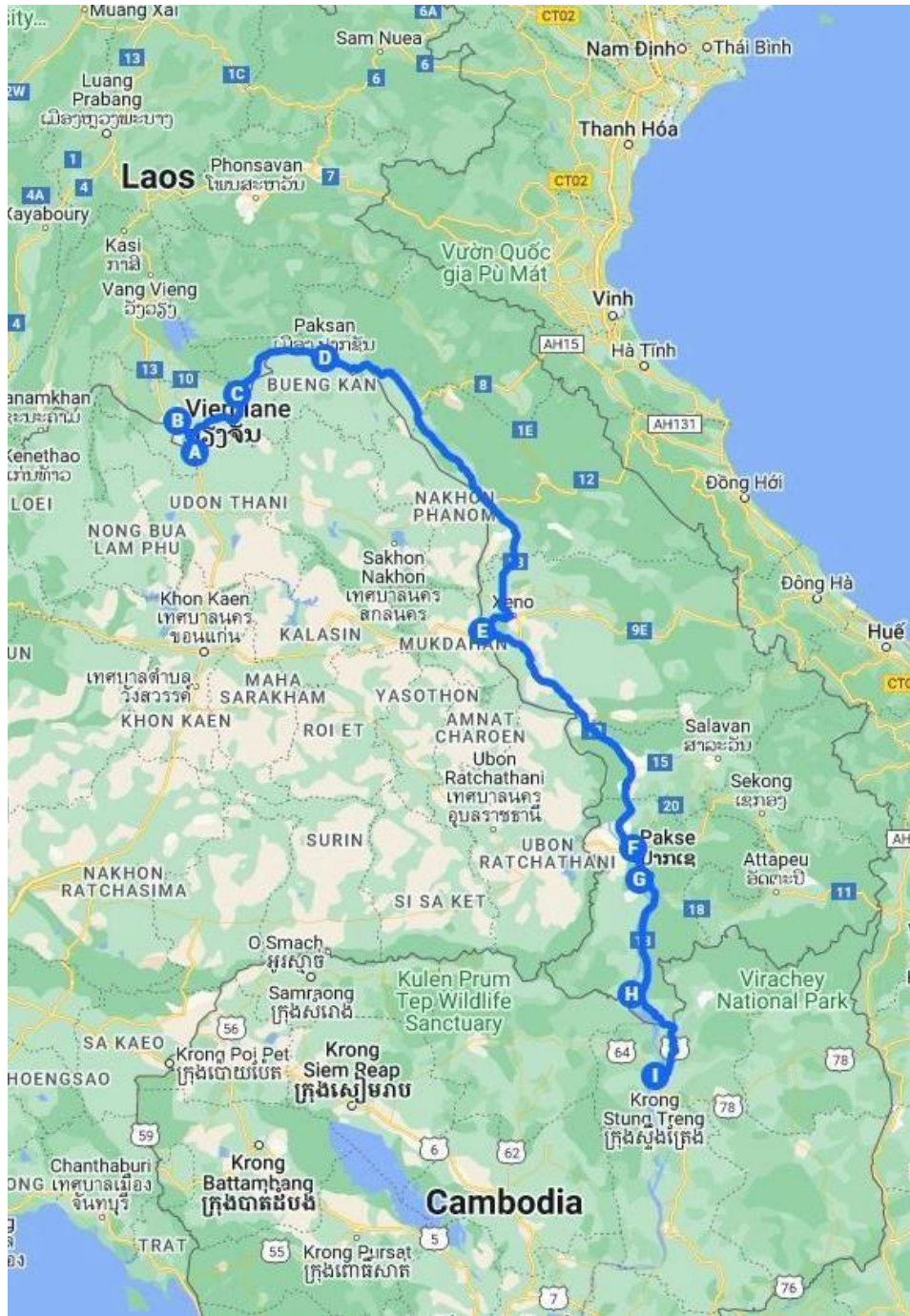
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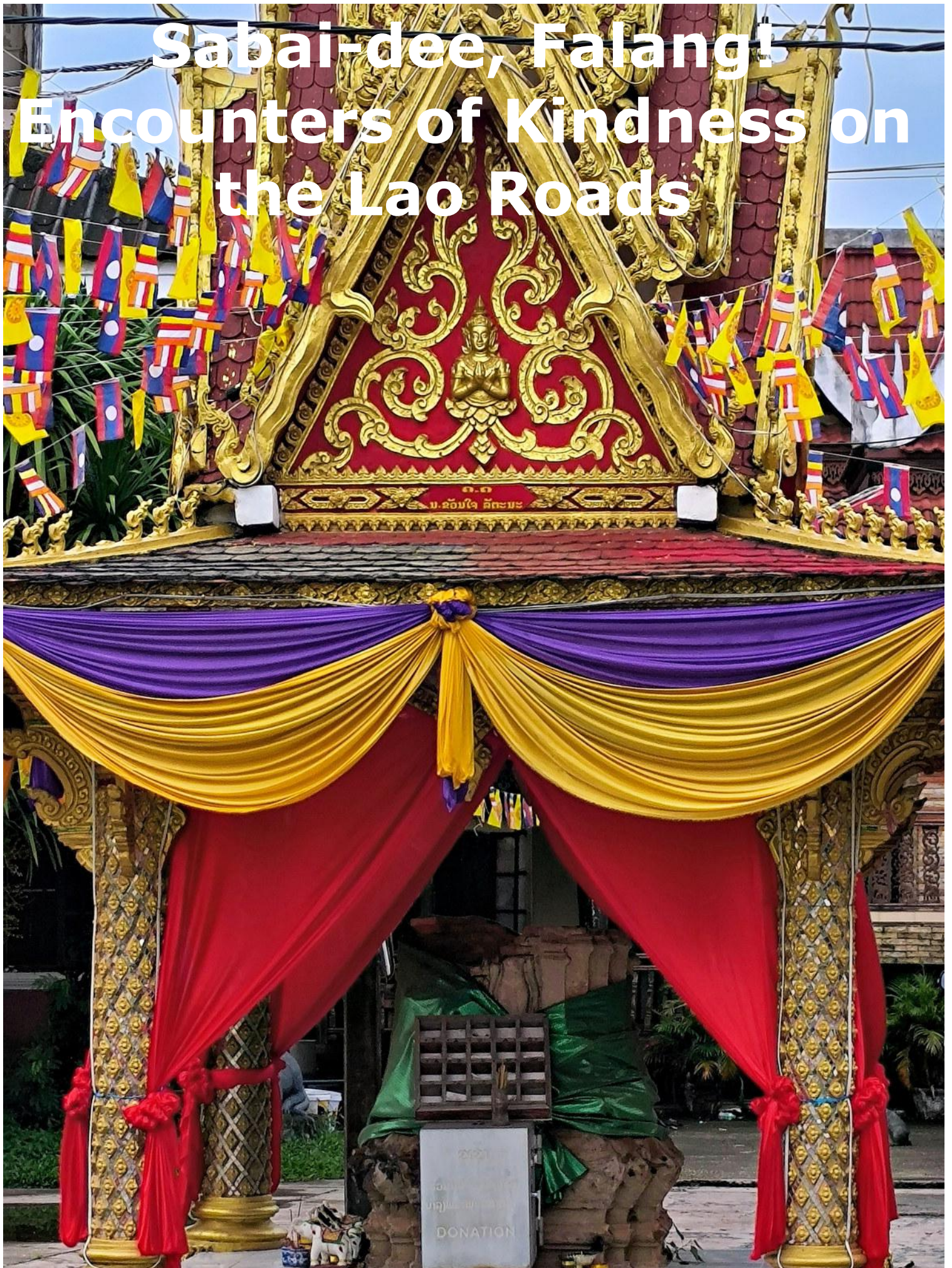
Thank You

While cycling touring in Laos, I was constantly amazed and humbled by the generous acts of strangers who showed me kindness. Many of whose names I will never know, I am deeply grateful to all of them.

My sister Amanda played a crucial role in documenting my travels. She selflessly organised my journal entries and photos, without which there would have been no record of my journey. I am immensely grateful to her.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to my friend Val Abrahamse. She kept my personal and financial matters in order while I travelled the world. Without her conscientious efforts, it would have been impossible for me to achieve my goals.

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Sabai-dee, Falang!

Encounters of Kindness on the Lao Roads

Chapter 1: Borderlines and Beginnings

Scams, storms and friendly faces

The morning rain tapped gently on the corrugated roof of the guesthouse in Nong Khai, Thailand, as if urging me to linger. With only thirty kilometres separating me from Vientiane, Laos's capital, there was no rush. The guesthouse owner, a woman whose warmth seemed to radiate from every gesture, made it even harder to leave. We spoke in fragments—her English, my Thai, and the universal language of smiles—but the exchange was enough to remind me why I travel: for these fleeting connections that leave a lasting imprint.

Eventually, I wheeled my bicycle out into the damp air and pedalled toward the Thai immigration office. The process was surprisingly smooth, a rare gift at border crossings where bureaucracy often tangles into chaos. But the relief was short-lived. On the Lao side, the officers demanded \$50 for a visa instead of the usual \$30. I protested, but my words dissolved into the humid air. At the border, one is always at the mercy of authority. With reluctant resignation, I handed over the money, the sting of injustice clinging to me like the drizzle that refused to let up.



Crossing into Laos should have felt like a homecoming. Six years had passed since my last visit, and I had imagined a joyful reunion with familiar streets and the languid rhythm of the Mekong. Instead, irritation shadowed my arrival. Even the river, swollen and furious from the rains, seemed to mirror my mood. Its waters pressed against the banks, threatening to spill over, a reminder that nature, like bureaucracy, has its own unyielding power.

I wandered the riverfront, trying to shake off the frustration. Vientiane changed in my absence. Some of the improvements were welcome—new pavements, brighter facades, but others carried a bittersweet edge, as if the city were trading pieces of its soul for progress. The old charm lingered in pockets: the scent of fresh baguettes wafting from bakeries, the quiet dignity of temples weathered by centuries, the slow pace of life that resisted the rush of modernity. Yet I couldn't ignore the undercurrent of loss, the way memory and reality collided, leaving me unsettled.

That evening, as the Mekong surged beside me, I reflected on the paradox of beginnings. Journeys rarely start with the clean slate we imagine. Sometimes they begin with irritations, delays, and small injustices. But perhaps that is the point. Travel demands resilience. It asks us to carry both the beauty and the bitterness, to accept that the road ahead will be paved with potholes and kindness alike. And so, with the rain still falling and the city lights flickering across the water, I resolved to let Laos reveal itself on its own terms—scams, storms, and all.



Wandering Vientiane

The drizzle lingered into the next morning, soft and persistent, as though the city itself wanted to slow me down. Vientiane is not a place that rushes. Its rhythm is measured, unhurried, and I found myself falling into step with it. After a leisurely breakfast, I set out beneath my umbrella, chasing small errands that would become the day's unlikely adventure: a lens cap for my camera, lost somewhere along the road, and a mirror for my bicycle, essential in a country where traffic flows on the opposite side.

What should have been a simple task unfolded into a meandering pilgrimage across the city. The streets carried me past temples whose gilded roofs glistened in the rain, their walls whispering centuries of devotion. Monks in saffron robes moved quietly through the drizzle, their presence a reminder of the spiritual heartbeat that pulses beneath the surface of daily life. Each temple seemed to hold its own story, a fragment of Laos's layered past, and I lingered at its gates, humbled by the weight of history.

The scent of food was everywhere—grilled meats, steaming bowls of noodle soup, and the earthy aroma of sticky rice. Yet it was the humble baguette that drew me in, a legacy of French colonial days that has become a staple of Lao cuisine. I bit into its crisp crust and soft centre, marvelling at how something so simple could feel like a feast. Travel often teaches that joy lies not in grand gestures but in small, unexpected pleasures.



As the day stretched on, I realised that my errands had become an excuse to wander, to let the city reveal itself in fragments. Vientiane is the capital, but it does not bear the weight of power. Its streets are lined with modest shops, its pace dictated more by bicycles and tuk-tuks than by the urgency of politics. Even the rain seemed to conspire to keep things gentle, softening the city's edges and blurring its lines.

By evening, I returned to my guesthouse with a new lens cap, a bicycle mirror, and a heart full of impressions. The drizzle had not let up, but I no longer minded. Vientiane had offered me something more valuable than errands completed: a reminder that wandering without a destination is its own kind of pilgrimage. In the slow rhythm of its streets, I found a lesson in patience, in savouring the ordinary, in letting the journey unfold without haste. In the process, I met the very talented artist, Tim Williams, from the UK, but living in Thailand.





Chapter 2: Heading South in The Season of Floods

Into the Floods

The morning broke with a rare gift: sunlight. After days of drizzle, the sky seemed to open in a gesture of mercy, and I hurried to pack my gear before the clouds could change their mind. Vientiane was still stirring, its streets not yet alive with the hum of traffic, and I relished the quiet as I pedalled out of the city. My destination was Buddha Park, a place I had visited years before, hoping this time the journey would be smoother.

The road surprised me. Where once there had been rough gravel and potholes, now a ribbon of fresh pavement stretched ahead, gleaming in the morning light. It felt like a small victory, a cyclist's dream. But as I approached the park, the triumph dissolved into shock. Much of the area lay underwater, swallowed by the swollen Mekong. Concrete statues of gods and demons rose eerily from the flood, their faces half-submerged, as if the river had claimed them back into its mythic embrace. It was a reminder that in Laos, nature always has the final word.

I pressed on, searching for Route 13—the artery that runs south through the country toward Cambodia. Asking for directions proved futile. The locals smiled politely, nodding in ways that suggested agreement but offered no clarity. It was not dishonesty, but a cultural kindness: better to nod than to disappoint. And so I relied on instinct, following the road as the signs of flooding grew more severe. Soldiers lined the banks, stacking sandbags in a battle they seemed destined to lose. The water crept closer, indifferent to human effort.



When I finally reached Route 13, relief washed over me—only to be replaced by frustration. The road was narrow, crowded with buses, trucks, and cars, each vying for space. Potholes yawned like traps, deep enough to swallow a wheel whole. It was a rider's nightmare, a gauntlet of hazards that demanded every ounce of concentration. The beauty of the landscape blurred into the background; my eyes were fixed on the asphalt, scanning for danger.

For a brief stretch, salvation arrived in the form of a "two-wheel tractor," a slow-moving machine that carved a path through the chaos. I tucked in behind it, riding its slipstream, grateful for the buffer it provided against the onslaught of traffic. But the reprieve was short-lived. Soon I was alone again, navigating the madness, my nerves frayed by the constant roar of engines and the jolt of every pothole.

By mid-afternoon, the sight of the Dokphet Hotel felt like a mirage. It was only 3:30 p.m., and I had covered barely eighty kilometres, but I did not hesitate. I needed to rest my mind, a place to breathe. The hotel was a sanctuary: spacious rooms nestled in a lush garden, a restaurant nearby, and a price so modest it felt like a gift. For the first time that day, I exhaled fully, letting the tension drain from my body.

That night, as I wrote my journal in the quiet garden, I reflected on the paradox of the road. Travel is not always about beauty or discovery. Sometimes it is about endurance, about surviving the chaos long enough to find peace at the end of the day. The floods, the potholes, the relentless traffic—all of it was part of the journey, as essential as the temples and the smiles of children. To cycle through Laos was to accept both the serenity of its landscapes and the fury of its roads. And in that acceptance, I found a strange kind of joy.



Children of the Villages

The storm had passed, but its memory lingered on the road. Branches lay scattered like forgotten toys, and potholes had transformed into murky pools whose depths were impossible to guess. Each puddle was a question mark, each stretch of asphalt a gamble. I learned quickly to watch the cars and motorbikes ahead of me, reading their movements like a script. If they swerved sharply, I followed suit; if they slowed, I braced myself. In this watery labyrinth, survival meant observation.

Ten kilometres later, the asphalt smoothed into a newly paved road, and the relief was overwhelming. The hum of my tyres against clean pavement felt like music, a rhythm that carried me forward with ease. The landscape opened up, revealing farmlands half-submerged by floodwaters, their green edges blurred by mist. Beyond them rose the mountains, ghostly and beautiful, their peaks veiled in clouds. It was a scene both haunting and serene, a reminder that beauty often hides in the aftermath of chaos.

The villages along the way were alive with greetings. "Sabai-dee, falang!" children called out, their voices bright against the damp air. They waved with such enthusiasm that I couldn't help but smile. At every water stop, the ritual repeated: curious faces, shy giggles, and the inevitable photo shoot. Some children posed boldly, others hovered at the edges until coaxed forward by their friends. Their innocence was disarming, their warmth a balm against the hardships of the road. In their laughter, I found the purest form of hospitality.



By the time I reached Paksan, the day's trials had softened into gratitude. The guesthouse I chose was modest, a small bungalow tucked away from the bustle, but its charm lay in the kindness of its proprietress. She welcomed me with a smile that felt like home, and the price—barely four dollars—was almost absurd in its generosity. The hot shower was bliss, washing away not just the mud but the weight of the day. I sat on the porch afterwards, listening to the quiet hum of the village, and felt as though I had struck gold.

That night, I realised that although the roads were unforgiving, the storms were relentless, the people met me with open hearts. Kindness was everywhere—in a wave, a smile, a child's laughter, a guesthouse owner's welcome. It was this kindness that carried me forward, reminding me that resilience is not only about enduring hardship but also about embracing joy when it appears. In the villages of Laos, joy was abundant, and it was impossible not to be changed by it.









Sleepless Nights, Spectacular Rides

The night in Vieng Kham was restless from the start. Just as I had surrendered to sleep, a knock rattled the door. My heart leapt as though I had been jolted awake mid-ride, adrenaline surging through my veins. It was nothing more than a case of mistaken identity, but the damage was done. Sleep fled, leaving me wide-eyed in the dark. I turned to the glow of my phone, scrolling through videos until the hours dissolved into dawn. By the time the rain began its morning percussion on the roof, I was exhausted. I forced myself onto the road. The air was thick with humidity while small hills rose ahead, demanding energy I did not have. My stomach growled, reminding me that I had skipped breakfast.

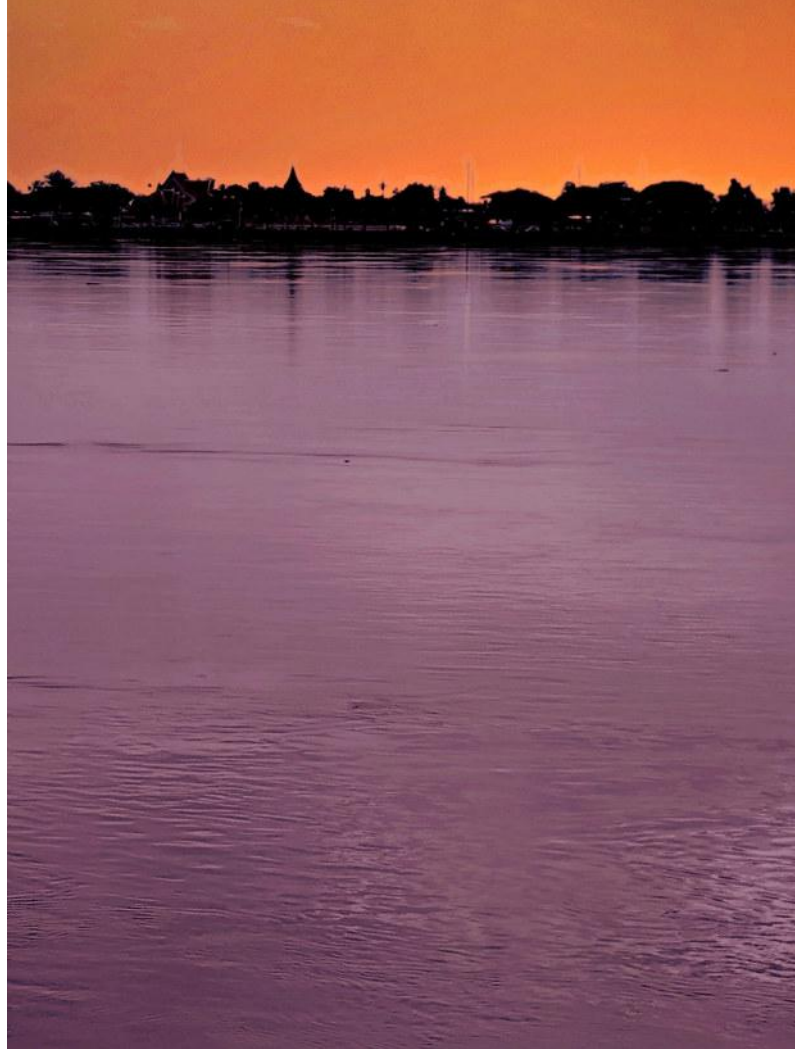
Fifty kilometres in, I stumbled into a roadside eatery, where an omelette on rice became salvation. The simple meal energised me, a reminder that sometimes survival is measured in eggs and grains.

Dark clouds gathered as I ate, threatening another deluge, and soon the road narrowed into a stretch of construction. Gravel and dust clung to my tyres, but mercifully, the disruption lasted only a few kilometres. When the clouds drifted away, the landscape revealed its grandeur. To my left, the Annamite Range unfurled like a living wall, its peaks rising in jagged defiance against the sky. Mist curled around the slopes, softening their edges, while the river shimmered at their base. The sight was so arresting that fatigue dissolved into awe. Every turn of the road offered a new perspective, a fresh revelation of beauty.



By late afternoon, I rolled into Thakhek, a riverside town perched on the Mekong. The day's hardships—the sleepless night, the hunger, the sweat—fell away as I checked into the Mekong Hotel. My room was modest, but the view was extraordinary. From the outdoor restaurant, I watched the river surge past, its surface alive with currents, while across the water the lights of Thailand flickered like stars. Dinner was simple, but in that moment it felt like a feast, a celebration of endurance and arrival.





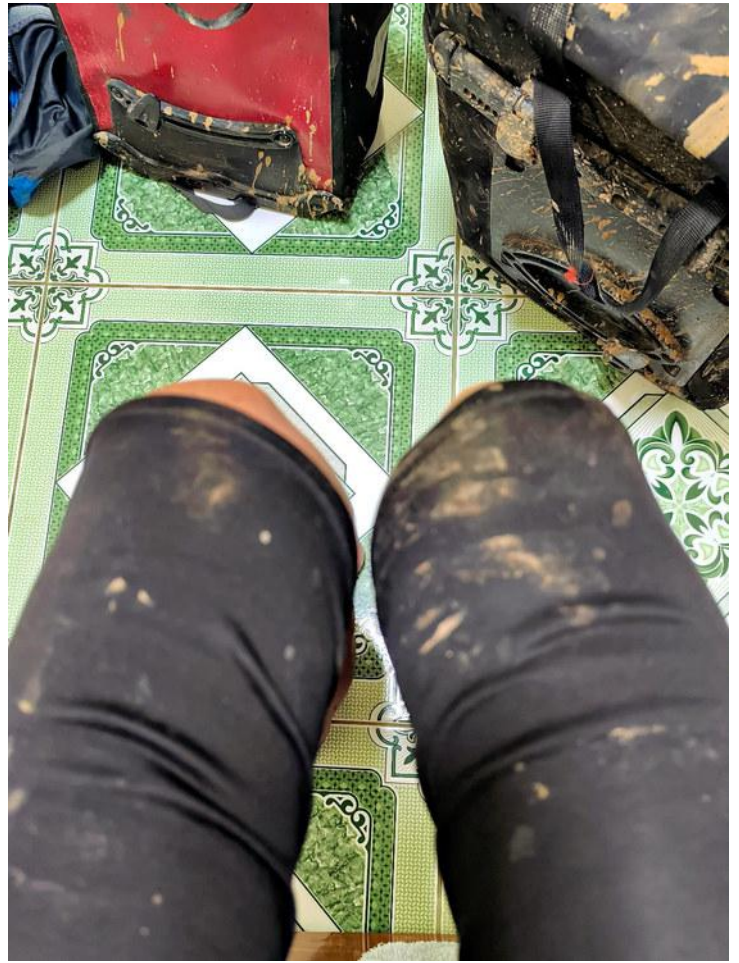
Muddy Roads and Instant Noodles

The rain returned with vengeance as I left Thakhek, turning the riverside road into a quagmire. Mud clung to my tyres, each rotation a battle against suction. Progress slowed to a crawl—five kilometres in half an hour—and frustration gnawed at me. By the time I reached seventy-five kilometres, I was caked in mud, my body weary. A roadside guesthouse appeared like a lifeline. The proprietress charged me more than seemed fair, but I didn't argue. At ten dollars, even an overpriced room was salvation. With no food vendors nearby, I turned to my emergency stash of instant noodles, slurping them in gratitude before collapsing into bed. Travel teaches humility: sometimes survival is measured in noodles and shelter.









Chapter 3 - Savannakhet and Vat Phou

Chapter Seven: Savannakhet Supplies

The next morning, the road improved, and so did my spirits. Savannakhet welcomed me with its wide boulevards and colonial echoes. I wandered its streets with purpose, stocking up for the long stretch south toward Cambodia. Bamboo shoots, mushrooms, lotus seeds—markets brimmed with the bounty of the rainy season. Children played soccer in rice paddies, buffalo grazing nearby, a tableau of rural life that reminded me of Africa. The town was both practical and poetic, a place to prepare for the unknown while savouring the present.









Markets of Plenty

Leaving Savannakhet, I cycled under an overcast sky that mirrored the lush scenery. Roadside stalls overflowed with mushrooms and lotus seeds, women led buffalo to pasture, and villagers fished in flooded paddies. Each scene was a reminder of resilience, of life lived in rhythm with the rains. That evening, a humble guesthouse became my refuge. The manager, seeing my hunger, hopped on his motorbike to fetch me a meal. It was modest—rice piled high, a few vegetables—but it was delivered with kindness. In Laos, generosity often takes the simplest form.









Pakse and the Xe Don River

The road south carried me to Pakse, where the Xe Don River meets the Mekong. Guesthouses lined the banks, and I chose one perched above the water. The carnival lights of riverside stalls flickered in the dusk, their aromas mingling with the scent of rain. My room was less than pristine, but I laughed as I scrubbed it clean, armed with bathroom cleaner and insect repellent. Travel is not about perfection —it is about embracing imperfection with humour. Pakse became a place of rest, of sorting through photos and nursing the beginnings of a cold, while the river flowed endlessly past.

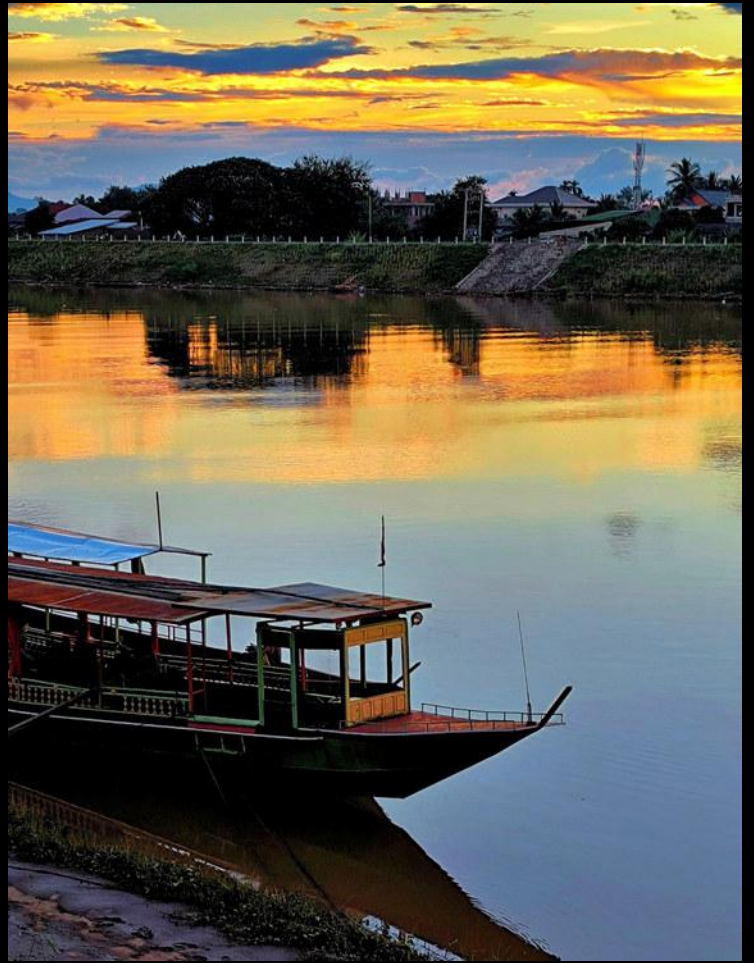








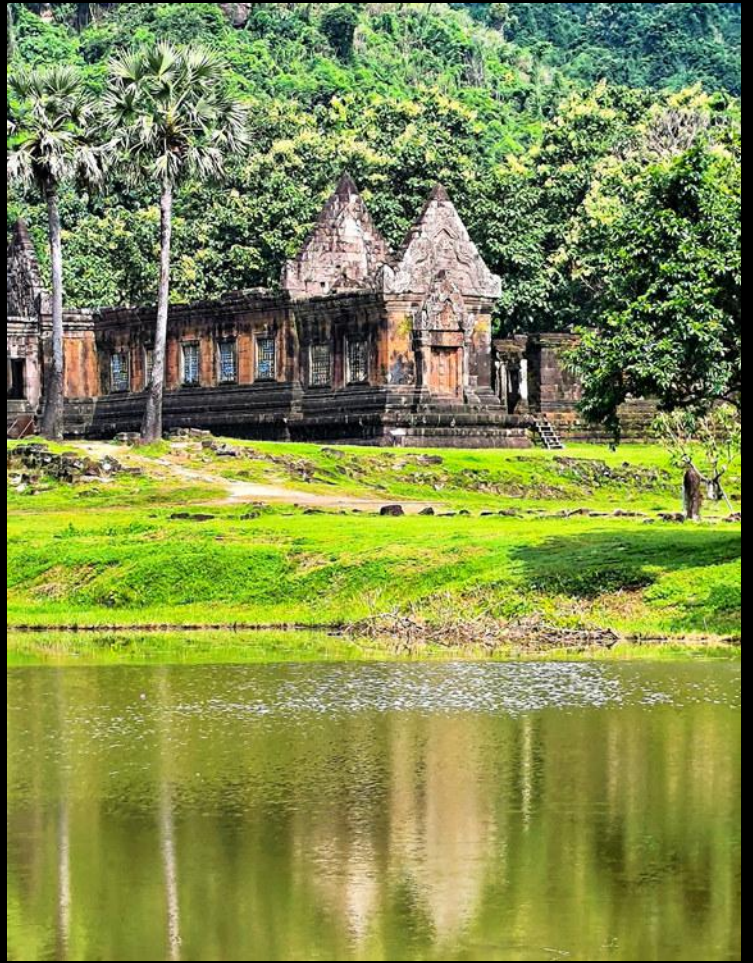
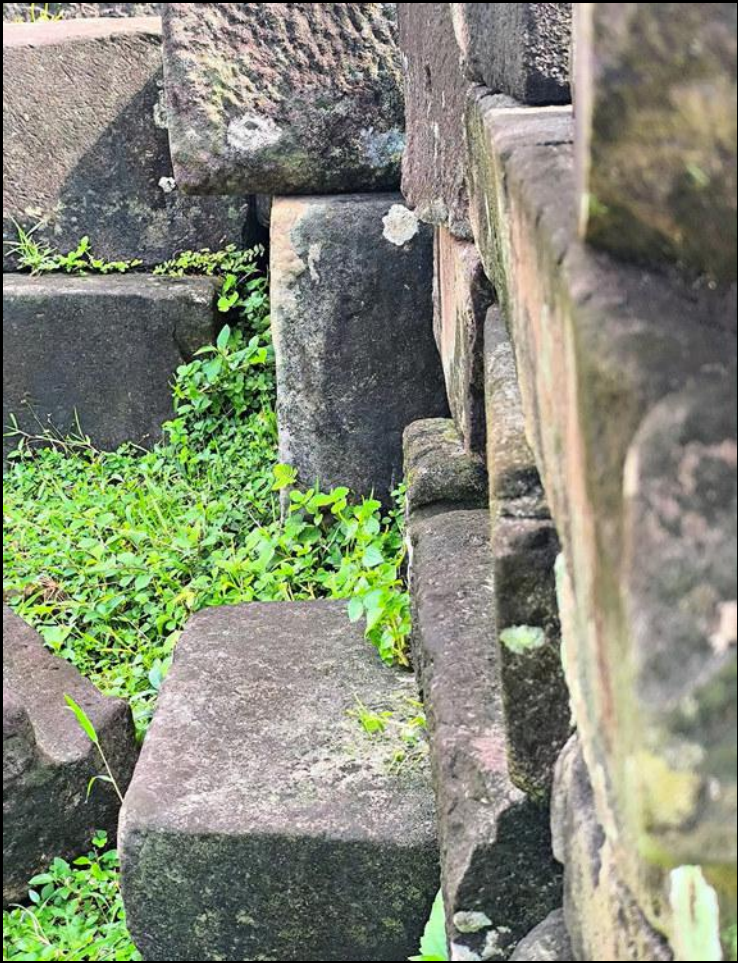




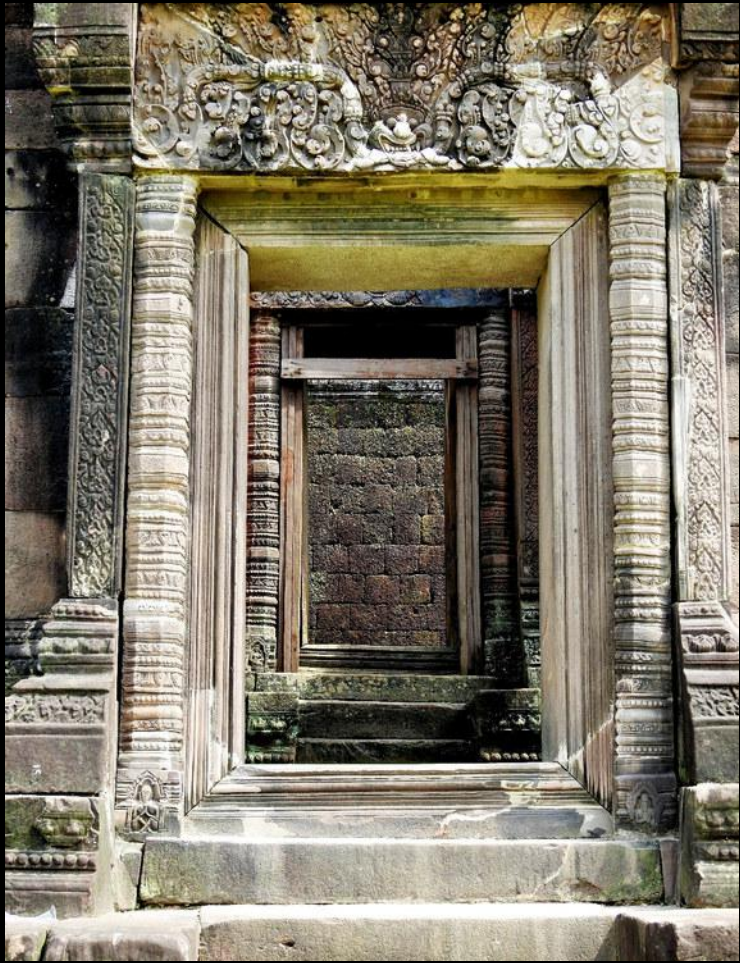
Vat Phou and the Little Guide

From Pakse, I rode to Champassak, where the ruins of Vat Phou awaited. The UNESCO site rose from the landscape like a memory of empires past, its stone stairways leading to a summit with sweeping views of rice fields below. The grandeur of Khmer engineering humbled me, a reminder of civilisations that once flourished here. Nearby, at Prasat Hong Nang Sida, a seven-year-old girl appeared, her laughter and gestures transforming her into my impromptu guide. She led me through the ruins, handed me a lotus leaf to shield against the sun, and held my hand with a sweetness that lingered long after. In her innocence, I found the purest form of hospitality, a gift more precious than any monument.









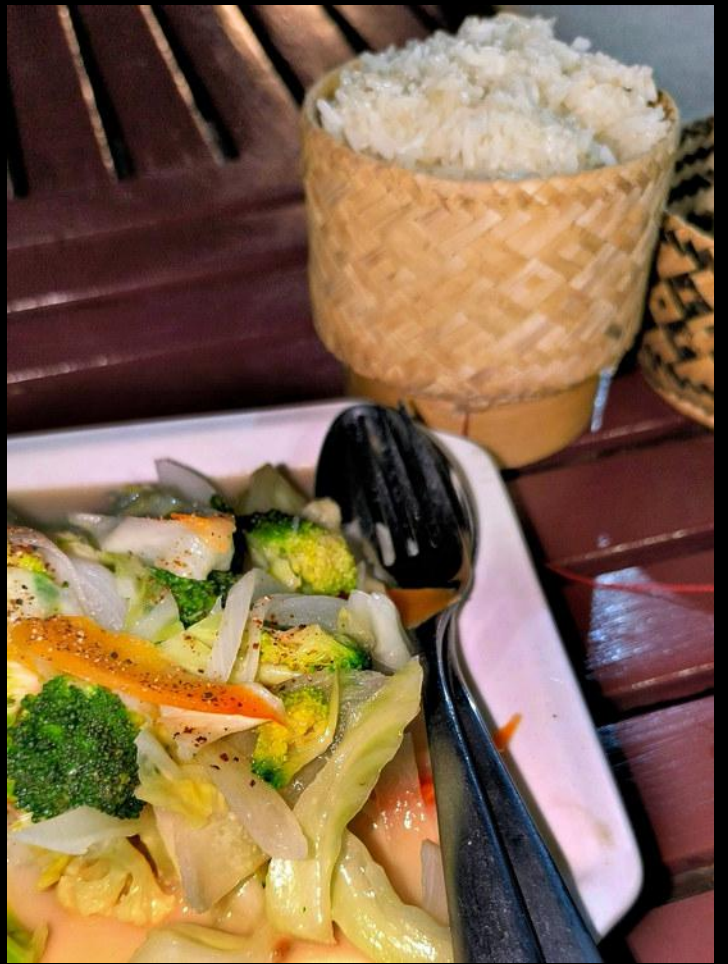




Four Thousand Islands

The Mekong widened into a labyrinth of islets, the famed Si Phan Don —Four Thousand Islands. Crossing by boat was daunting, but watching motorbikes loaded with ease reassured me. On Don Khong Island, I lingered, savouring the slow rhythm of river life. Boys leapt from bridges into the current, laughter echoing across the water. Storms rolled in, thunder cracking overhead, forcing me to shelter in abandoned buildings. Yet even in the chaos, the islands offered peace. I spent an extra day here, updating my journal, spending the last of my Lao kip, and letting the river’s rhythm seep into my bones.









Crossing into Cambodia

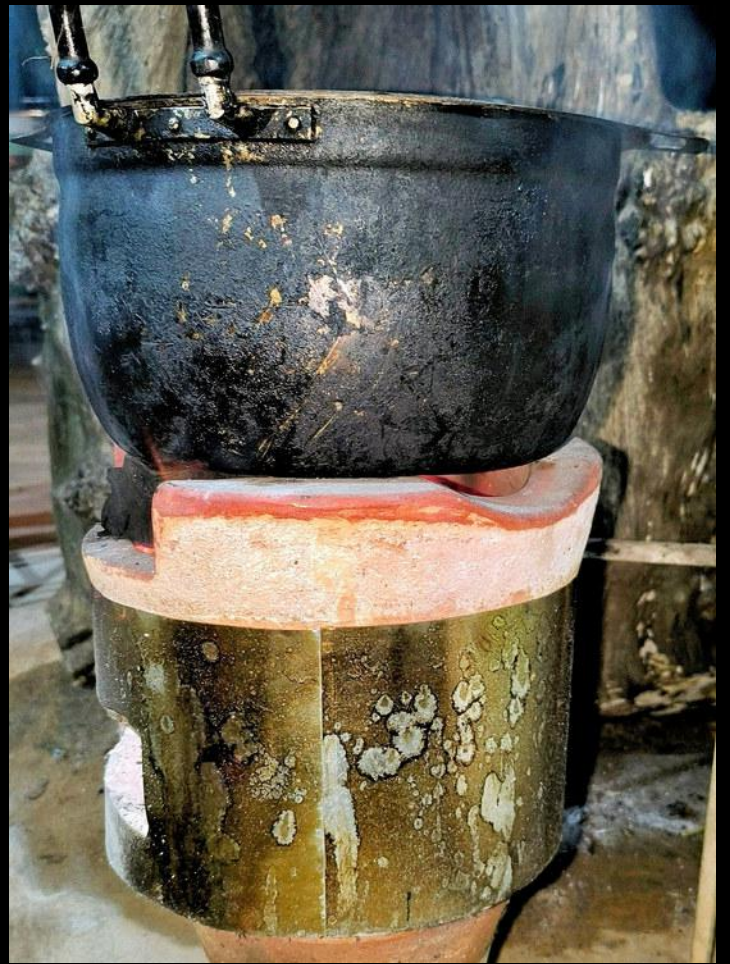
The border loomed, notorious for corruption, but fortune favoured me. The Lao officers asked for a two-dollar "stamp fee," which I refused, and they let it pass. Cambodia welcomed me with smoother bureaucracy: a visa stamped for \$35. The road south was rough, the gravel thickly laid, but motorbikes had carved a narrow track that guided me forward. "This too shall pass," I repeated, a mantra against frustration. Along the way, I met a Japanese cyclist whose journey mirrored mine and glimpsed villagers celebrating Pchum Ben, the Festival of the Ancestors. Two-wheel tractors carried families to ceremonies, their laughter a reminder of continuity, of traditions that bind generations. By the time I reached Stung Treng, rooms were scarce, the town alive with festival crowds. I settled for a modest hotel, whose cleanliness was questionable, but its air-conditioning was a blessing. The journey had carried me across borders, through floods and kindness, into Cambodia's embrace.



Epilogue: Lessons from Laos

Laos revealed itself in contrasts: flooded roads and serene temples, scams at borders and gifts of kindness in villages, exhaustion and awe. To cycle through its landscapes was to live in tension—between hardship and joy, chaos and beauty. Yet it was the people who defined the journey. Children waving from stilted homes, guesthouse owners welcoming me with smiles, strangers fetching meals when none were available. Their generosity carried me forward, reminding me that resilience is not only about enduring storms but also about embracing kindness when it appears.

As I crossed into Cambodia, I carried Laos with me—not just its rivers and mountains, but its spirit of hospitality, its lessons in patience, its reminder that joy often arrives in the simplest forms. Travel is never just about distance covered. It is about transformation; about the way landscapes and people reshape us. In Laos, I found not only roads and rivers but also resilience, kindness, and the quiet beauty of connection. And that, more than any kilometre, is the true measure of the journey.



Journey Through Laos: A Cyclist's Tale

Welcome to my adventure blog! This post marks my 9th cycle ride through the stunning landscapes of Laos as I make my way from Thailand to Cambodia. With hundreds of routes at your disposal, the path I've taken offers just one glimpse into this beautiful region. If you're contemplating this adventure for your own cycling tour, there are a few key things to keep in mind.

Distance and Navigation:

While the distances I've documented in this post are accurate according to my trusty odometer, don't be surprised if they're not the most direct routes! I often find myself taking scenic detours that reveal hidden gems along the way. Embrace the journey and the unexpected twists!

Timing Your Adventure:

This particular ride took place between September and October 2024, so keep in mind that the experience may have changed. Roads may have improved or transformed completely, and accommodations could have undergone upgrades—or maybe even disappeared! It's best to stay updated and flexible with any travel plans.

Safety First—Insurance Essentials:

Before embarking on your adventure, investing in a comprehensive travel insurance policy is a must. Make sure it covers theft, loss, and medical issues. Be cautious of policies that exclude "dangerous activities." While I don't consider cycling a high-risk pursuit, it's always wise to read the fine print!

Dress for Comfort:

Spending long hours in the saddle means that comfort is crucial. I highly recommend good-quality padded cycling shorts! Personally, I cycle in regular sandals, but wear what feels best for your own feet. Given the tropical heat, warm clothes are hardly necessary—except perhaps during cooler elevation climbs. And don't forget your personal essentials: insect repellent and anti-chafe cream will be your best friends. A cycling helmet is advisable, even if I sometimes ride without one.

Your Trusted Ride:

Choosing the right bicycle is pivotal for enjoying long rides. Comfort should be your priority, and for me, that means my trusty mountain bike with a Merida frame, Shimano Deore parts, Alex wheels, and Schwalbe tyres. To transport my gear, I rely on Tubus racks and Ortlieb panniers—they might be an investment, but they pay off with their durability. Knowing how to fix a punctured tube is an invaluable skill, and having a phone holder on my handlebars for navigation has saved me numerous times. I usually navigate with Organic Maps or Google Maps. A handlebar bag is a must to keep my camera and other essentials within easy reach!

Stay Informed:

For those eager for more cycling adventures, I recommend checking out the Lonely Planet e-book. It's budget-friendly and packed with handy tips to enhance your journey.



Discovering the Charm of Laos

Capital City: Vientiane

Welcome to Vientiane, the heart and soul of Laos! This vibrant capital city is where culture meets modernity, offering everything you'd expect from a bustling town, plus a unique charm that sets it apart. Stroll through its lively streets, explore beautiful temples, and indulge in delicious local cuisine.

Currency: The Lao Kip

When it comes to money, the Lao kip (K) is the star of the show, as it's the official currency used for everyday transactions. But don't be surprised if you see Thai baht (B) or US dollars (US\$) accepted in some places—these currencies can sometimes come in handy during your adventures!

Language: Speak the Local Lingo

The vibrant sounds of the Lao language await you! While Lao is the official language, the dialect spoken in Vientiane is particularly popular. You might also encounter other related languages, such as Tai Daeng and Phu Thai, making it a fascinating linguistic tapestry to explore.

Religion: A Spiritual Journey

Immerse yourself in the serene world of Theravada Buddhism, the predominant religion in Laos, embraced by about half of the population. You'll find stunning temples and spiritual ceremonies that reflect the deep-rooted traditions and values of the Laotian people.

Location and Size: A Hidden Gem in Southeast Asia

Nestled in the heart of the Indochina Peninsula, Laos is a landlocked country that beckons travellers with its breathtaking landscapes and rich history. Spanning 236,800 square kilometres, it boasts a diverse geography, from rolling hills to stunning rivers. Laos shares borders with China to the north, Vietnam to the east and southeast, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west, and Myanmar to the northwest.

Population: A Warm Welcome from 7.17 million

During your visit, you'll encounter the warmth and hospitality of the Laotian people, a population estimated at around 7.17 million. Get ready to connect with locals who are eager to share their traditions and stories!



About the Author

Originally from Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. Her passion for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique - a MTB race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and embarked on a journey that took her all the way to Cape Town. Upon returning, she found adjusting to her regular life surprisingly difficult and decided to continue her travels on two wheels.

In March 2007, Leana and her companion Ernest Markwood began a bike ride that turned into an around-the-world cycle ride. They started cycling together but eventually found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

Leana has cycled across Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe, the UK, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. After Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina, and spent several years cycling through South, Central, and North America. She then visited many larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

As of now, Leana finds herself back in Southeast Asia.





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It is the unknown around the corner that turns my wheels.



