

# Cycle Touring Laos (4)

## A Gentle Interlude on the Long Road to China



*Leana Niemand*



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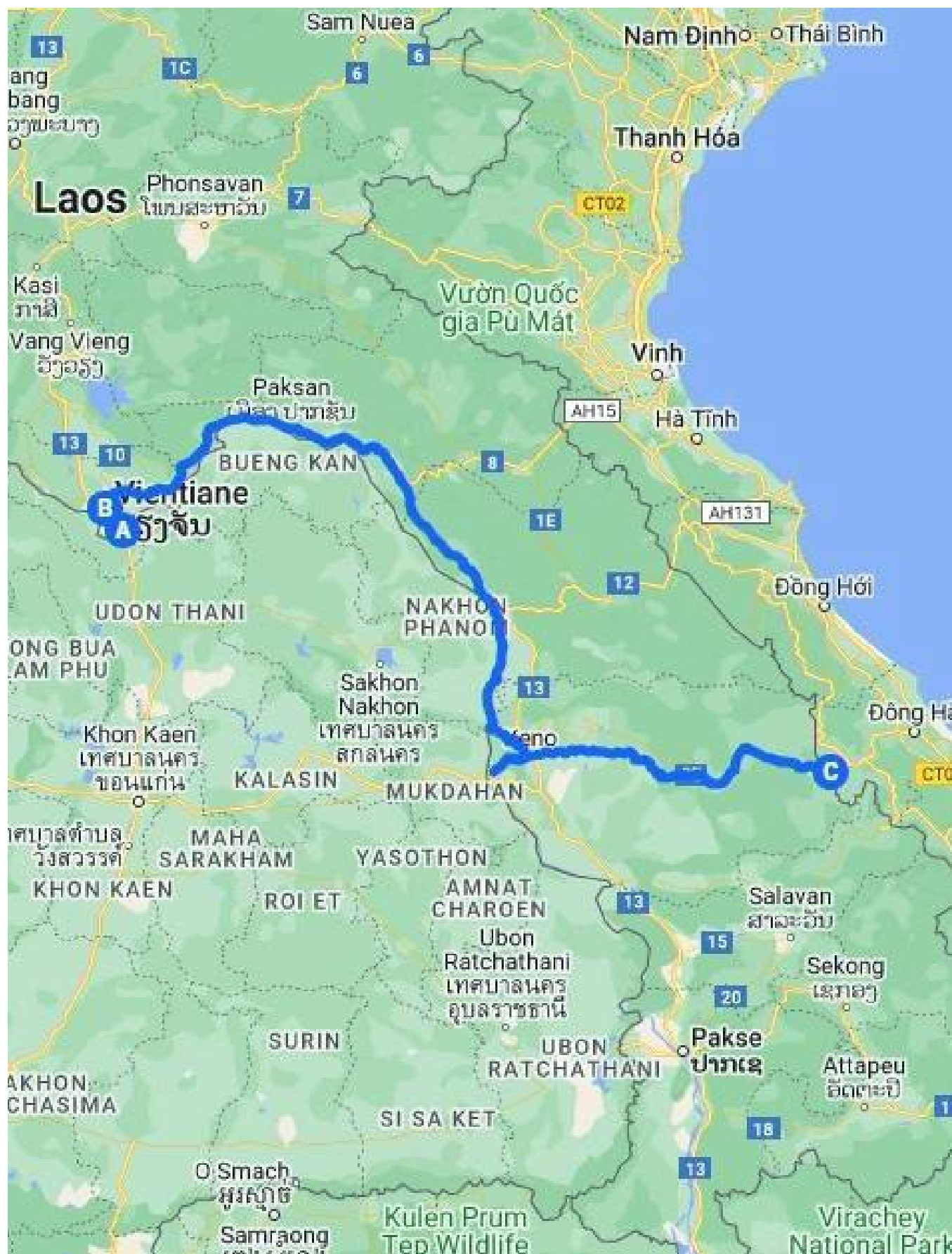


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## **Thank You**

*I am immensely grateful for the kindness of strangers and the random acts of generosity I encountered during my cycle tour of Laos. It was truly a humbling experience.*

*My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my journey.*

*I owe a great deal to my friend Val Abrahamse for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.*

*Lastly, a big shoutout to Gerda Van Der Sandt, who made my writing more coherent and patiently tolerated my use of the Oxford comma.*







# **Laos: A Gentle Interlude on the Road to China**

## ***Prologue***

*Laos unfolded before me like a country suspended between breaths—unhurried, unassuming. I crossed into it with no grand plan beyond the simple truth that I had time—thirty-three days of it—and a road that would eventually stretch into 897 kilometres of quiet discovery.*

*The Mekong was my first companion, a broad, slow-moving presence that seemed to set the rhythm for everything that followed. Its waters carried stories older than memory, and as I cycled along its banks, I felt myself slipping into that same ancient tempo.*

*I didn't yet know that Laos would test my patience as much as it soothed it. That visas, documents, and bureaucratic detours would weave themselves into the journey as insistently as the river's curve. That storms would arrive without warning. That the road would offer both frustration and grace in equal measure.*







## **Crossing Into the Quiet Country**

I awoke refreshed as the rhythmic clattering of the train's wheels lulled me into a deep slumber. By seven o'clock, I stepped onto the platform at Nong Khai station, rested and ready. A three-kilometre jaunt led me to the inviting doors of Mut Mee Guesthouse, but with nothing else left to explore in Thailand, I eagerly loaded my mobile home and headed for the Friendship Bridge.

Crossing the border into Laos was a breeze; sunlight glinted off the Mekong as I pedalled the short 25-kilometre distance into Vientiane, the capital unfolding in soft, unhurried tones. My first stop was the Chinese Embassy—forms collected; expectations adjusted. A two-week wait for a visa was not what I had planned.

With little choice, I found a room at the Dhaka Hotel, a place that whispered of bedbugs, but after a quick spray of insect repellent, I figured it was better to unpack than sleep on the pavement.

In the spirit of exploration, my first priority was to get local currency and set up a SIM card. As I strolled toward the riverfront, I suddenly heard someone call my name. To my surprise, it was Ernest—a familiar face from the past! We cracked open a couple of beers and caught up, sharing stories, the kind of easy companionship that travel sometimes gifts without warning.





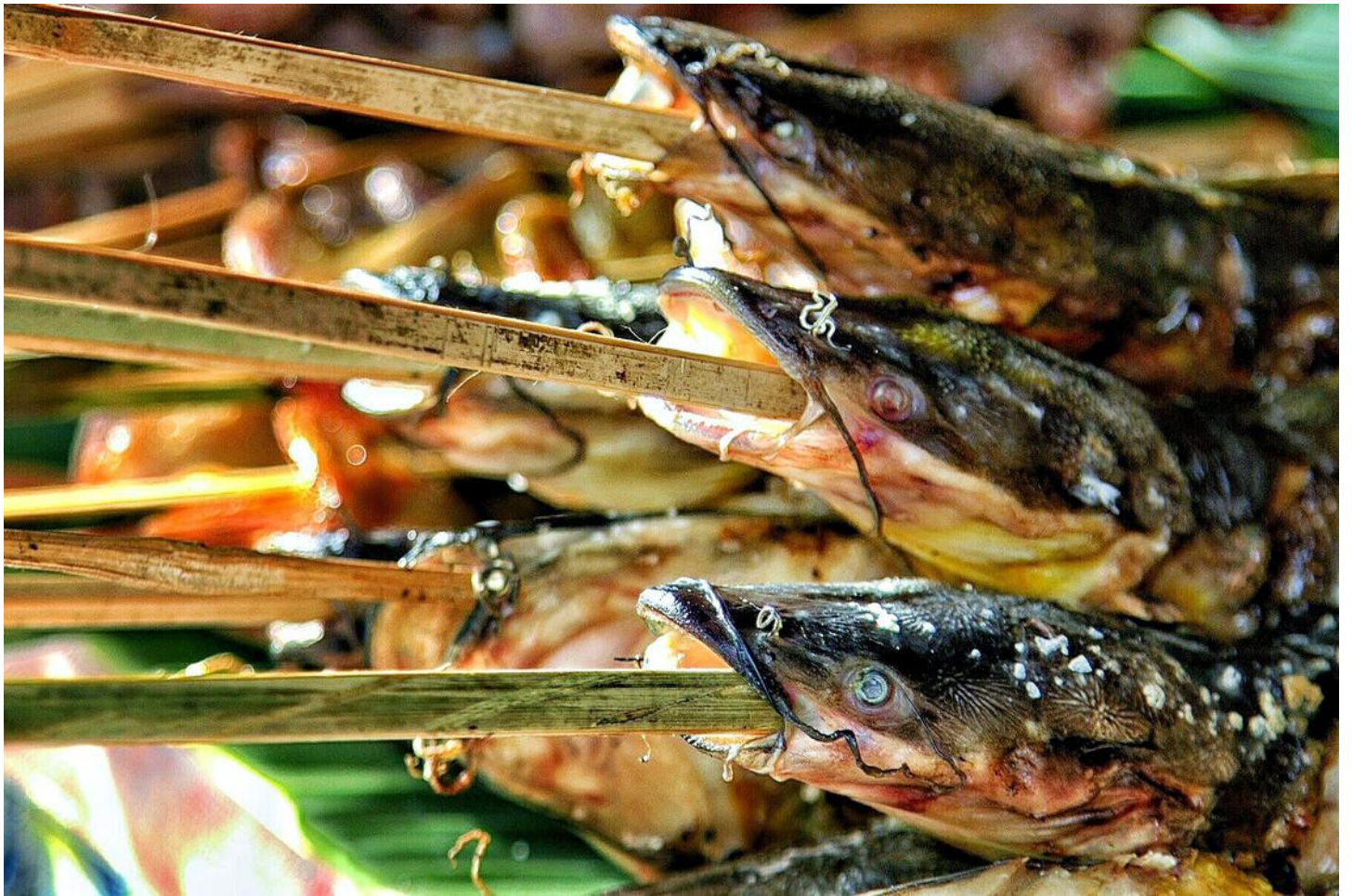


## **Vientiane - Days That Drift Like the River**

A week drifted by with the slow rhythm of the river. I moved to Christian's apartment—a WarmShowers host from Germany whose immaculate condo overlooked the Mekong. I had a room to myself, a quiet refuge, though I suspected my traveller's chaos tested his tidy sensibilities; let's be honest, I wasn't quite in that league!









## **North Along the Mekong's Gentle Curve**

The 19th was marked on my calendar as the day I could collect my visa, but that was still a week away, and adventure awaited! I hopped on my bike and rode upriver. The Mekong's vast expanse unfolded before me, a winding ribbon of beauty as I gradually made my way along its banks, passing through charming rural communities. The joyful calls of children, "Sawadee, falang!" (Hello, foreigner), mingled with the sweet sounds of cowbells and the bleating of baby goats, filling my heart with cheer.

The scenery was nothing short of spectacular—typical Laotian cloud formations floating majestically in the sky, with low-lying fog teasing the peaks of distant mountains, creating an exquisite backdrop for my ride. As I pedalled along, indigenous markets popped up, showcasing a humble selection of banana hearts and bamboo shoots. The first part of the journey unfolded along a smooth, flat road, but before long, it transformed into a narrow, winding path that twisted through quaint settlements, where I dodged chickens and piglets who seemed all too curious about this foreign traveller.

Every curious gaze I met told me I was off the beaten path; this area wasn't frequented by "farangs." The delighted giggles of children echoed in my ears, and I couldn't help but smile as playful dogs darted into their yards.

After riding 105 kilometres, a guesthouse near Ban Vang caught my eye—my first sighting of accommodation all day! I figured it was destiny and decided to make it my overnight stop. The charm of the place was amplified by a basic restaurant across the road, serving delicious noodle soup, cold beer, water, and sodas—exactly what I craved, even if the bed felt like sleeping on a rock. But who was I to complain? I was in Laos, savouring every moment of the journey!















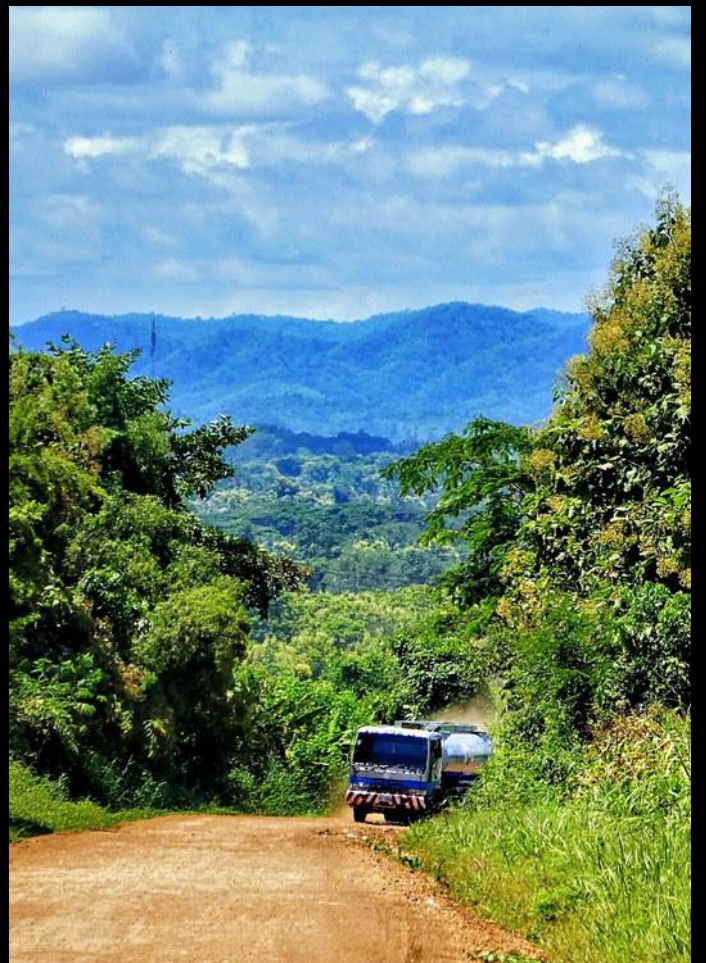
## **Rough Roads and Small Reckonings**

As the first light of day broke through, my morning took an unexpected turn. I hopped out of bed and, to my horror, found myself stepping straight onto a scorpion! It turned out that the unfortunate creature was already dead, but the pain still sent me dancing around the room, clutching my foot like a woman possessed. Thankfully, I had heard that Laos didn't boast any deadly scorpions, so after a brief moment of panic, I pushed aside my worries about blurry vision and palpitations.

Soon after departing Ban Vang, the road transformed into a bumpy dirt track, and the ride became a slow, exhilarating trek. With each dangerous incline and daring descent, I manoeuvred around potholes, all the while taking in the breathtaking views of the distant mountains and the shimmering river that marked the border with Thailand. I couldn't help but imagine the smooth, paved roads just across the water—it felt both tantalising and frustrating.

Along the route, villages were few and far between; the occasional buffalo looked up in surprise as I whizzed past. It wasn't long before I realised a pressing email about an apartment purchased warranted calling it a day. Knowing I'd need internet access and a printer—luxuries not guaranteed on this stretch of road it was best to return to Vientiane. In retrospect, I might have rushed my departure from Vientiane.















## **A Return Through Rain and Red Tape**

The crows of roosters and the chatter of hens woke me from my slumber, nudging me into action. It was time to take a bus back to Vientiane and tackle the essential tasks that awaited.

The early morning ride to the bus stand was a delightful hubbub, filled with life. Children dashed off to school, farmers set off for the fields, and women bustled through market stalls, while others made their way to temples—a vivid tapestry of daily life in rural Laos.

At the taxi stand, communication barriers melted away; the driver understood my request without needing to exchange a single word. After loading my bike, I enjoyed a steaming plate of noodle soup while I waited for the minivan to fill up. As the rain began to pour outside, transforming the roads into muddy rivers, I settled into the van, feeling an odd sense of comfort in the chaos.

By the time we reached Vientiane, the familiar streets felt almost comforting. I returned to Mixok Guesthouse, ready to dive into the whirlwind of tasks that awaited me. Each step felt like a part of an adventure—one that I was determined to embrace, even amid the challenges.















## **Vientiane - Waiting, Wandering, and the Weight of Paperwork**

As I signed and scanned the necessary forms, afterwards I took a detour to the old city wall—a fragment of Vientiane's past that few seem to notice. Originally flanked by three brick walls, the city was laid waste by Siamese troops in the mid-16th century, leaving just a sliver of history behind. Standing in front of the remaining section, I felt as if I had uncovered a hidden gem, enjoying the quiet presence of a site most people know nothing about.

Next, I ventured to Buddha Park, a place unlike any other. The park is an eclectic blend of reinforced-concrete Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, each a fascinating creation that beckoned attention. Among them stood a colossal reclining Buddha, a sight to behold. This surreal park was crafted in the late 1950s by an artist who was part priest, part monk, and part guru, mingling the philosophies of Buddhism and Hinduism in his own quirky style. His artistic journey took an unexpected turn when he chose to flee Laos for Thailand, disillusioned with the communist government's ideologies.















## **A Visa in Hand, a City in Pause**

The morning dawned with excitement as I finally collected my long-awaited Chinese visa. With that hurdle crossed, I immersed myself in the busy work of copying documents that required certification. A quick stop at a hairdresser spiced up my look—I felt like a new person. However, my search for a Notary Public to certify my passport copy quickly spiralled into a frustrating quest. Despite the daunting task, I soon learned that my options were limited; without a South African Embassy in Laos, finding someone who could assist and speak English proved to be an uphill battle.

## **The Bureaucratic Spiral**

Packed and ready to leave, an email arrived from the attorneys: seven more documents needed to be signed. My frustration simmered. For two weeks, I had stressed the urgency of receiving everything by the 19th. Now, on the brink of heading to China, I faced a serious dilemma.

The disconcerting reality was their apathy; they were indifferent to whether I missed a bus or incurred extra costs. A successful transfer meant they didn't need to prioritise customer service, so they charged exorbitantly for their lacklustre assistance—no wonder I was fuming!

At 9 AM, I made my way to the Office of the Supreme People's Prosecutor, hoping to find a Notary Public—this turned out to be neither quick nor cheap. Afterwards, I landed in an internet café to scan and send off those vital documents. By late afternoon, I returned to the Mixok Guesthouse, begrudgingly paying for an extra night and hauling my bags upstairs. Time felt like it slipped away from me, forcing me to revise my plans.







The northern chill now seemed ominous, and I decided it was better to cycle to China through Vietnam, exploring the vibrant south coast of China instead. The adventure continued, and one thing was clear: my journey was far from over! The road, as always, would decide.

### **Back to the Open Road**

Mixok Guesthouse had wrapped me in its warm embrace, but as my laundry spun and dried, a pull in my chest nudged me toward adventure. "Are you leaving us?" the cheerful chap at reception asked, his smile gleaming with genuine curiosity. I couldn't help but grin back—every departure felt like a reunion with the open road.

Peddalling away from Vientiane, I revelled in the thrill of watching the city shrink in my rear-view mirror. Each rotation of the pedals felt like a small rebellion against the ordinary. A quick stop at a bustling baguette stall filled my bag with deliciousness. Even though I had traversed this route not long ago, the landscape captivated me anew. The road south unfolded gently. I rode alongside schoolchildren who giggled as they matched my pace. Women in conical hats balanced their wares on shoulder poles; elderly women wove brooms from dried grasses; markets brimmed with baskets, mats, and clay stoves. A man on a motorbike rode past with goldfish in plastic bags, their orange bodies flickering like small lanterns, ready for a new home!

The day turned out to be a delightful mix of warmth and easy riding. By late afternoon, I reached Thabok and found a modest guesthouse—simple, quiet, enough.















## **Thabok – Pakkading - Buffalo Paths and Rivers**

As I set out, the cheerful shouts of “Sabaidee falang!” from small children punctuated the day, while surprised adults looked up, their curious faces echoing the familiar question, “Where you go?” I waved and smiled, knowing the details would mean little to them. The skies were overcast, and I braced for the anticipated rain that, thankfully, never came.

Cycling through this rural wonderland, I became enchanted by images of ladies leading buffalo to lush pastures and fishermen sitting patiently in long, slender boats, awaiting a bite. The rice fields glimmered a vibrant green under the cloudy sky, a breathtaking backdrop to the laughter of kids gleefully jumping into the river below.

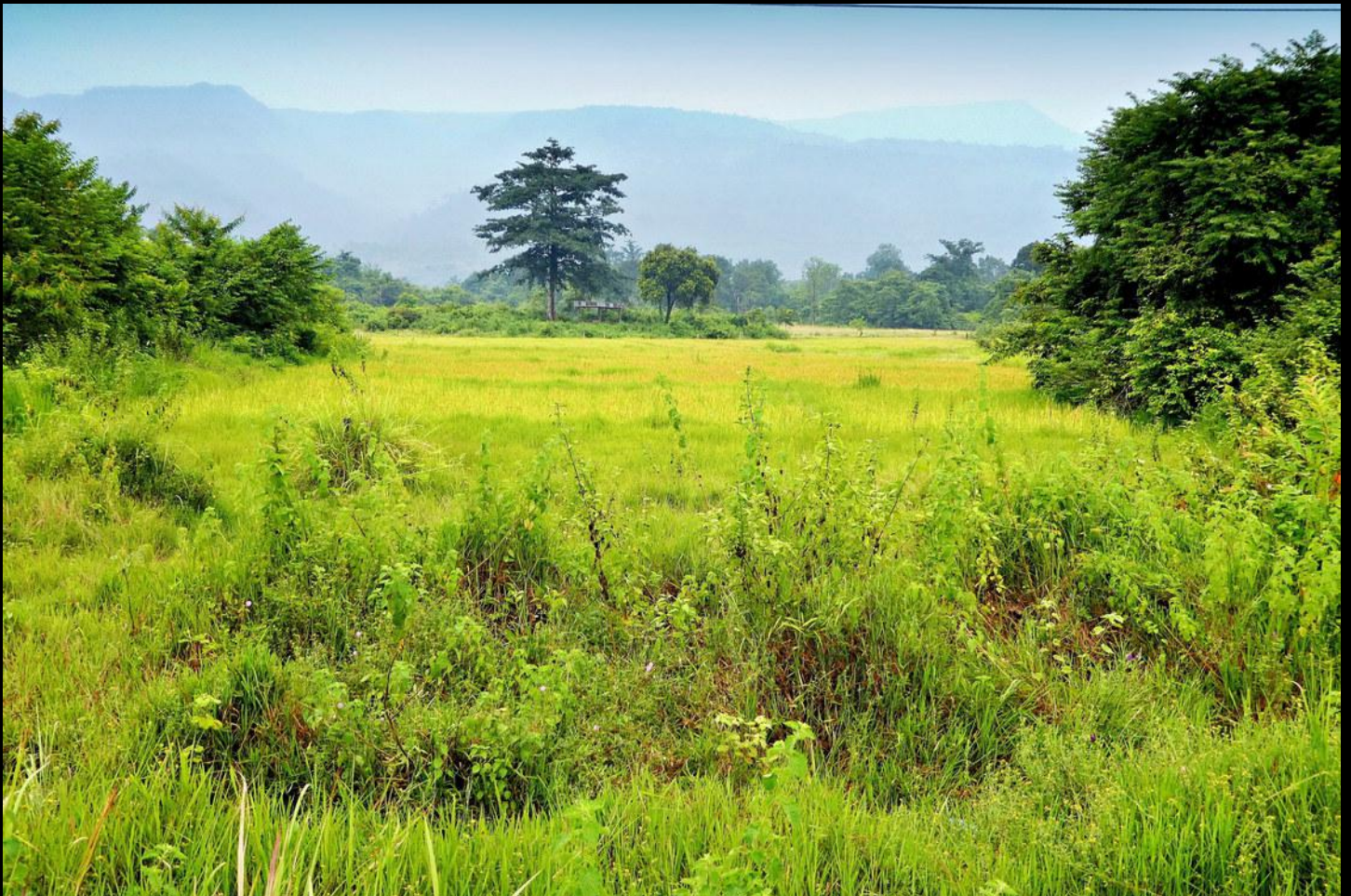
Then, I caught an effortless slipstream behind a two-wheel tractor—talk about a game-changer! Riding alongside at a steady 20 kilometres per hour, I felt like I was gliding on the wings of the wind, making great time toward my next destination.

Finally reaching sleepy Pakkading after biking 100 km and was pleased to find an excellent guesthouse nestled at the confluence of the Mekong and Kading Rivers—serene and pristine, a perfect spot to rest after a day of exploring.















## **Storms, Stomach Aches, and Small Mercies**

I awoke to a light drizzle, which was a bit unsettling, especially since my stomach had decided to join the chaos. Navigating the landscape with dampened spirits, I wished for clearer skies. Though it wasn't ideal, nature insisted on keeping things interesting—after all, when could a cyclist ever escape an unexpected bush stop in the rain?

Fortunately, the clouds relented around midday, though the overcast skies still offered a gloomy backdrop to my ride. Not long after lunch, dark clouds loomed menacingly ahead, and I hesitated just a few kilometres from my destination, questioning if I'd make it before the heavens broke loose again.

And then it happened: a torrential downpour drenched the landscape. Seeking shelter among a gaggle of motorbikes, I huddled with other travellers, holding my breath until the storm passed.

When it finally eased, I continued toward Ban Thangbeng. Aomchay Guesthouse appeared after 100-odd kilometres, just as the clouds darkened again. After a hot shower, I wandered to a small eatery where the simplest ingredients transformed into a meal of surprising depth—one of those dishes that lingers in memory long after the journey moves on.















## **Markets, Myths, and the Great Wall of Laos**

The morning ride to Thakhek was bright and easy. and the morning couldn't have been more perfect! The sun broke through the clouds, casting a warm glow that made every pedal stroke feel invigorating. As I cycled along, I unexpectedly stumbled upon a traditional market. What caught my eye was not just the vibrant colours and bustling atmosphere but a shocking display of wildlife for sale. It felt wrong—even illegal, considering the furtive glances of vendors as they hurriedly hid their wares beneath tables. I couldn't resist capturing a few sneaky shots of this surreal scene: a baby deer peeking out from beneath a cloth, a curious cat-like creature, and a bizarre assortment of animals, including iguanas, squirrels, and even what I guessed could be guinea pigs. The fish were equally mysterious, adding to the market's oddity.

As I approached Thakhek, I made a spontaneous stop at the Great Wall of Laos. This natural wonder took my breath away. Formed by geological fissures, it resembled a massive human-made structure and was steeped in local legends. Some believe it dates back to the Sikhottabong Empire in the 19th century, serving as a defensive barrier, while others claim it functioned as a dike to protect against flooding. The possibilities sparked my imagination!

Once I entered Thakhek, I found a charming place to stay right along the riverbank. True to my routine, I made a beeline for the market in search of local flavours. The vibrant sights and scents promised an exciting culinary adventure!

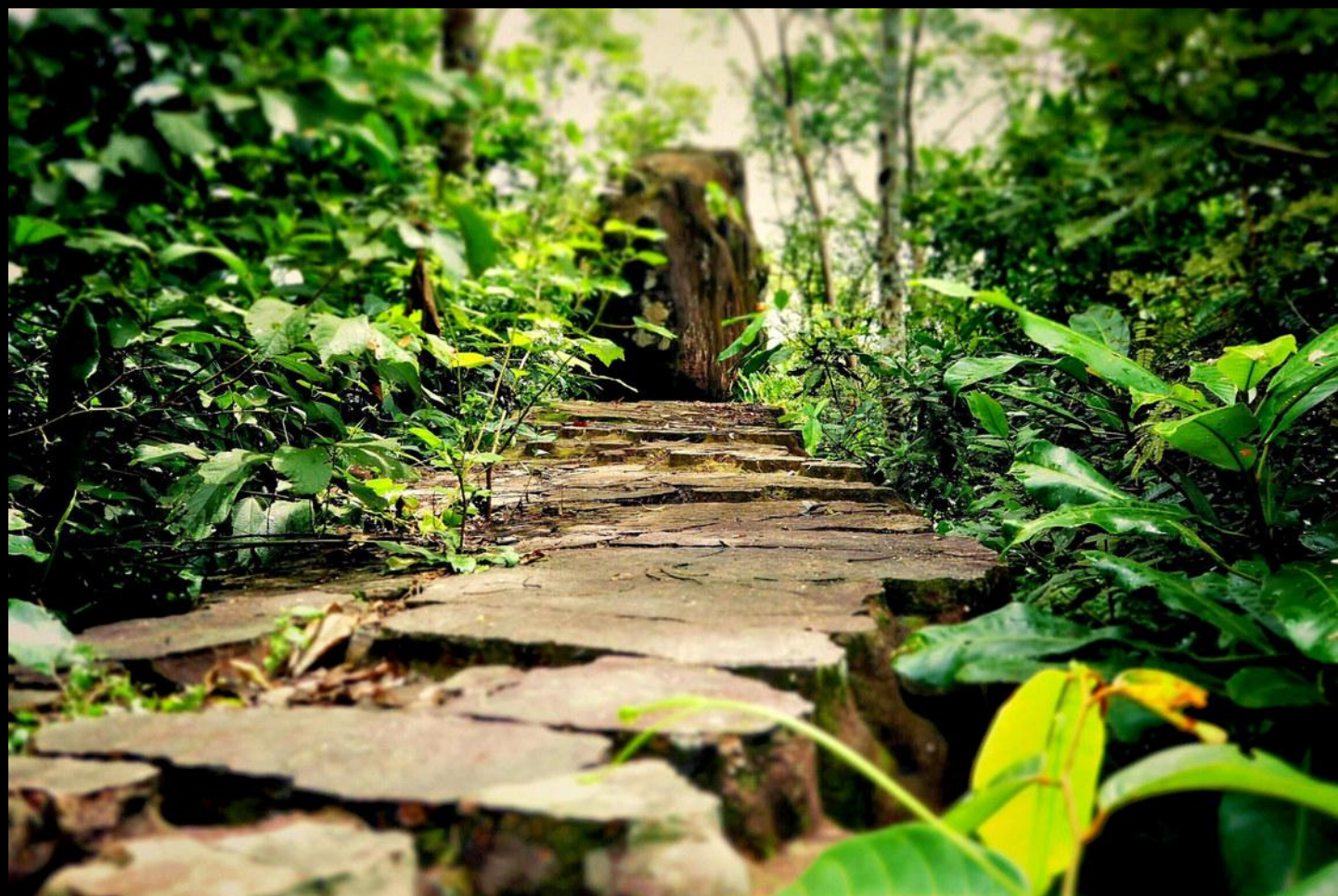














## **Mud Roads and Hidden Buddhas**

Today unfolded like a mini-adventure as I ventured deeper into the wonders of Thakhek, setting my sights on the famed Buddha Cave. Armed with my camera gear and a heart full of anticipation, I waved down a tuk-tuk, ready for a ride that promised to be anything but ordinary.

I had chosen not to cycle, swayed by whispers of treacherous roads, and those whispers turned out to be spot-on. The “poor condition” label was a gross understatement! The tuk-tuk lurched and bounced over potholes, sloshing through muddy puddles like a boat navigating stormy seas. At one point, it felt like I was part of an off-road expedition, including a little push from me to get through particularly sticky patches. By the time we arrived at the cave, I was a tad messy, but exhilaration trumped all.

The entrance fee was a modest 5,000 Kip, and they offered the option to rent a traditional Lao skirt for the same price. However, I opted for a sarong, feeling more comfortable with my choice. The real twist awaited me inside—after navigating the muddy trek, a prominent sign announced that no photographs were allowed. Talk about a buzzkill!

But the cave held a compelling story of its own. Discovered in 2004 by a farmer on a bat hunt, it housed 229 bronze Buddha statues believed to be over 450 years old. Legends whisper that they were hidden away during the Thai ransacking of Vientiane, part of a royal collection tucked safely underground. While I gazed at the awe-inspiring Buddhas, the haunting history echoed within the cave walls. The story lingered with me as I made my way back to town, my wallet lighter but my curiosity satisfied.







## **Rain Trails and River Towns**

The next leg of my journey surged forth as I rolled out on the river trail. This path, lined with vibrant fishing communities, sent waves of serenity through me, yet I soon faced the challenge of its fading presence, disappearing into the wilderness. Determined, I discovered a minor path clinging to life along the river—my trusty guide through this rugged landscape.

As I pedalled on, the dirt track buckled and turned into a game of dodge-the-pothole, and then, as if scripted, storm clouds gathered ominously overhead. The sky unleashed a downpour that made me seek shelter, and I watched the world turn murky through the rain-soaked canopy. Time stretched as I waited for the storm to ease, and eventually, as daylight began to fade, I slinked into Savannakhet after 125 km.

Immediately, I found myself drawn to the buzz of the night market, eager to soak up local flavours and sights. The following day was refreshingly straightforward as I tackled the Vietnamese visa application—a simple form, an effortless win! With my paperwork sorted, I embraced a day of leisure, diving into the overwhelming task of sorting through my ever-growing photo collection. The heat was sweltering, but with every image organised, I felt one step closer to capturing the essence of my journey.







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## **Return to Vientiane - The Long Detour of Documents**

Ah, September—a month that tested my patience more than I anticipated. As an Aries, I was thrilled to bid farewell to its chaos, but the lingering effects of Mercury retrograde had me feeling like I was navigating a maze blindfolded. Communication? An absolute mess! Picture a frustrating wait for essential paperwork like my Chinese visa and legal documents dripping in like a leaky faucet.

Then came an email from Savannakhet—more signatures and verification needed. Ugh, why is finding a Notary Public with an English stamp like hunting for a needle in a haystack? I rose early the next day, fuelled by a sense of urgency, and hopped on a bus to Vientiane. Little did I know that this trip would feel like an epic journey; we rolled in after 17h00, well past my hopeful return time!

With my Laos visa expiring soon, I rushed to extend it. The next morning, I returned to immigration, then to the courthouse, where I waited for officials to finish a meeting. Eventually, everything was stamped, signed, and DHL-ed. I allowed myself a cold beer at sunset, grateful the tide seemed to be turning.







## **Savannakhet - Lost Bags, Found Kindness**

At 10 sharp, I was back at the immigration office, triumphantly picking up my Laos visa extension before racing over to the bus station, eager to return to Savannakhet. The bus finally rolled in just past 21h00, and I felt a rush of excitement for the adventure ahead.

I woke up early the next day, ready to grab my Vietnamese visa, only to have my spirits deflated—I'd forgotten it was a Saturday! But Savannakhet had its charms. A small town with a rich history, it was lovely wandering the old quarters where century-old buildings whispered tales of the past, offering perfect backdrops for sunset photos. The riverfront was alive with vibrant food stalls, a fantastic spot for a bite to eat and a chance to practice some photography skills.

But horror struck! As I meandered through the night market, I suddenly realised: my handlebar bag—my beloved camera bag—was missing! My heart raced; not only was it precious to me, but it held my passport, critical documents, and all my bank cards!

In a panic, I retraced my steps (visions of applying for a new passport loomed large in my mind). I first checked the old quarters, but it was a bust. Then I rushed back to the lively riverfront—and there it was, sitting right where I'd left it! My bag was surrounded by people enjoying the sunset, a small oasis of serenity amidst the chaos.







I marvelled at how many places one could leave a bag in such a bustling area and return to find it untouched. I quickly thanked the bystanders who were blissfully unaware of the drama unfolding, then rushed back to the night market, where I'd left my beer. Miraculously, aside from a bit of melted ice, my drink was exactly like I'd left it. In that moment of relief, Laos, I thought, was a place where one could still lose a bag and find it again.

















## **Toward the Border, Through a Landscape of Memory**

Hurray! After much anticipation, I finally bid farewell to Savannakhet and set my sights on the Vietnamese consulate, arriving bright and early at 7:30 AM to collect my visa. The atmosphere was a mix of excitement and nerves as I stepped inside—only to be greeted by a friendly face at the counter. He dated my visa from the moment I collected it, which was a pleasant surprise.

But just as I was revelling in my small victory, I emerged to find my phone utterly lifeless. Panic set in for a moment, but I headed to the nearest Samsung office, praying for good news. The culprit turned out to be a faulty memory card—a simple fix! Phew! Filled with relief, I pedalled away from the bustle of the city and toward the Vietnamese border.

On my journey, I stumbled upon remnants of a turbulent past: one of the old war relics from the infamous "Secret War." It was a haunting reminder of the CIA's covert operations in Laos from 1961 to 1975, where 2.1 million tonnes of ordnance fell over the land. The statistics were staggering—260 million unexploded sub-munitions still litter the landscape, a testament to the legacy of conflict. Thankfully, organisations like COPE in Vientiane are working tirelessly to provide rehabilitation services for those impacted by this history.

The rest of the day was marked by a lighter mood. As I cycled through the lush scenery between the Mekong River and the Vietnam border, I could see that life here pulsed with nature. The countryside softened the weight of history. Rice paddies shifted from green to gold, signalling harvest. After 115 kilometres, I stopped at a roadside guesthouse, grateful for rest.







### **Mist, Mountains, and the Last Long Ride**

The day marked my last day of cycling in Laos, and it felt bittersweet. The landscape remained as enchanting as I remembered from my travels seven years ago, echoing the rural charm of Africa. I watched as bare-bum kids dashed about, laughing and playing with old tyres, while delightful aromas wafted in from nearby homes where women cooked over open flames. Chickens and goats roamed freely, and with every village I entered, the familiar calls of “falang, falang” from the children welcomed me.

Serious-looking mountains loomed ahead, yet the road gracefully twisted around them, making for easy pedalling. As it was rice harvesting season, women dotted the roadside, selling bundles of dried bamboo slivers for tying rice, and mist clung to the valleys. I met two cyclists—rare companions on this route—, and we chatted briefly before parting ways. Near the border, another small guesthouse appeared, and I settled in with a bowl of noodle soup.















### **A Quiet Crossing Into A New Country**

A short but exciting 20-kilometre ride brought me to the border, where a swift stamp in my passport welcomed me into Vietnam with a 30-day stay. The small village of Lao Bao awaited just down the road, and I decided to explore a bit before fully diving into this new chapter. I found an ATM and withdrew 3,000,000 dong—quite the haul at the exchange rate of 22,000 dong to the dollar! After that, I picked up a new SIM card, ready to stay connected as I continued my ride. Excitement buzzed in the air as I anticipated what lay ahead in this vibrant new country.







## ***Epilogue***

*My last morning in Laos unfolded with the same understated grace that had carried me through the country. A short ride to the border, a stamp, a nod, and suddenly the road ahead belonged to Vietnam. Yet as I pedalled toward Lao Bao, I felt the weight of departure settle gently on my shoulders.*

*Laos had been a lesson in patience and presence. In the art of waiting—sometimes willingly, sometimes not. In the quiet resilience of rural life. In the way landscapes can mirror one's inner state: mist lifting slowly from mountains, storms arriving without warning, rivers moving at their own unhurried pace.*

*It had been a place where I lost things and found them again. Where strangers kept watch over my belongings without knowing it.*

*As the border receded behind me, I carried with me the softness of the Mekong, the laughter of children, the rhythm of wheels on quiet roads, and the unexpected calm that comes from surrendering to a country's pace.*

*Vietnam awaited—but Laos lingered, like a gentle echo.*















# Journey Through Laos: A Cyclist's Tale

Welcome to my adventure blog! This post marks my 4th cycle ride through the stunning landscapes of Laos as I make my way from Thailand to Vietnam. 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 2016, 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

Hailing from the vibrant city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a path that would lead her to become the first woman to complete the entire route from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.

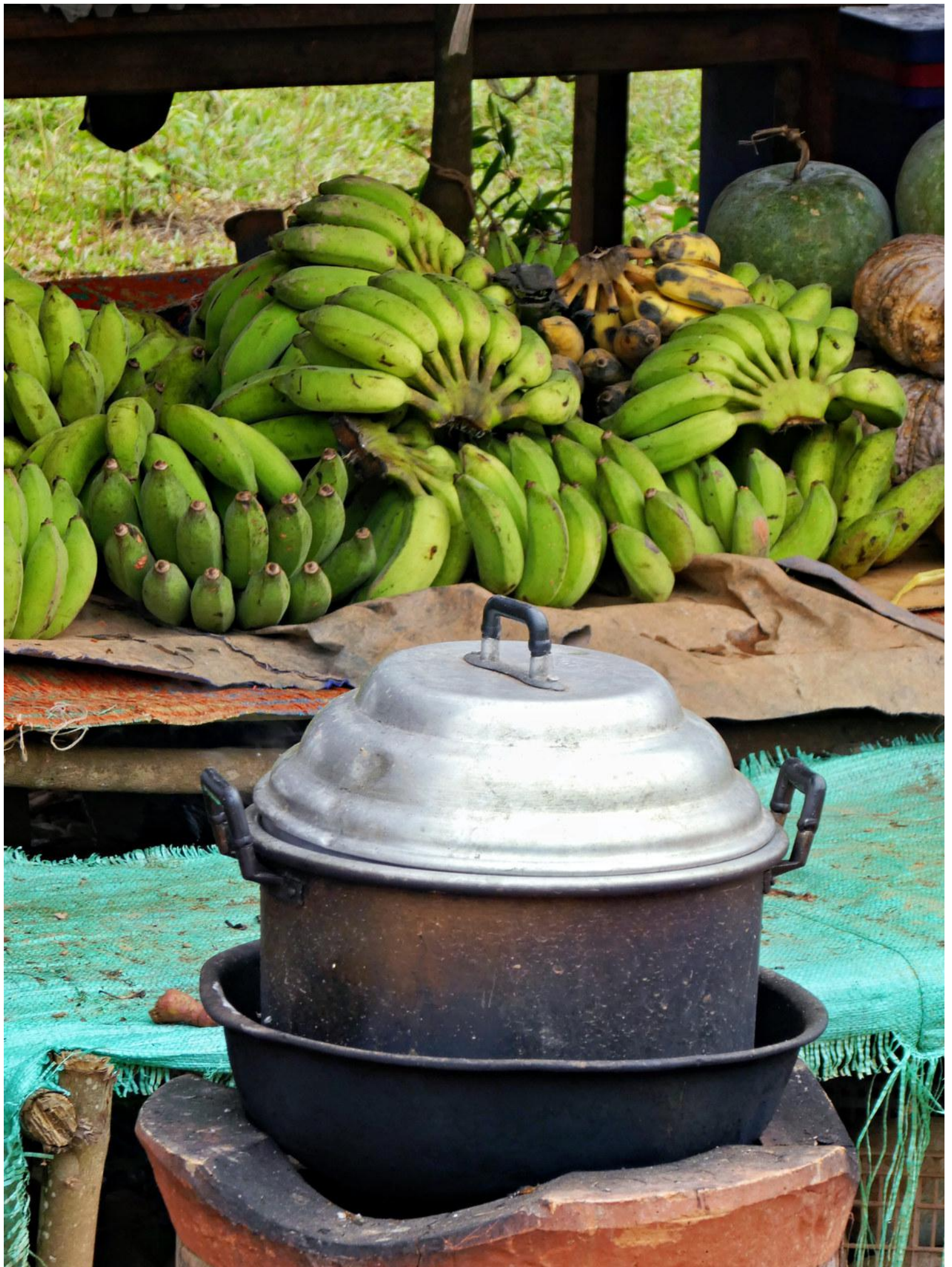


















**It's not a race. It's a journey in which neither the distance cycled, nor the destination is of any importance.**





# ***Along the Quiet Curve of the Mekong***

