

Caz and Craig have been traveling and living around the world since 1997.



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Many Moods of Mekong River Mirror the Cultural Diversity of Laos

June 9, 2011 By: guest writer

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Today's guest post comes from the lovely Barbara Weibel at Hole in the Donut.com. Barbara is an exceptional narrative writer as you will see from her following tale.



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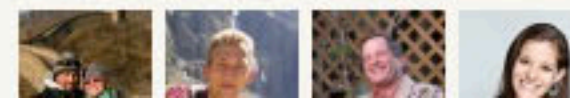


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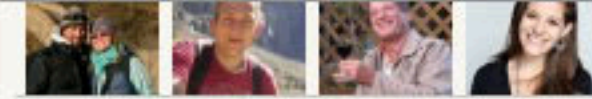
Khone Phapheng Waterfall southern Laos

Liquid mud swirled and eddied around jagged rocks protruding from the mighty Mekong River on my [cruise from northern Thailand into Laos](#). The captain deftly held our boat in the center of gentle rapids that set the boat swaying from side to side.

Cautiously, I climbed the metal steps to the bow, white-knuckled the railing on the upper deck, and glanced down just in time to see our hull pass a razor sharp peak that protruded a mere eight inches from the water, with very little room to spare.

Like icebergs, the bulk of rocks that litter the Mekong basin lie underwater, hidden from view. Knowing the boats that ply the Mekong are not equipped with sonar or depth finders, I grew more alarmed each time we entered another stretch of rapids. Whitewater meant rocks below; surely the more placid waters nearer the shore would be safer.

I needn't have worried. Like all experienced captains in Laos, ours **knew the river by heart**; every whirlpool, every submerged rock, every sandbar was imprinted upon his memory.



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When I learned that rapids signal the deepest part of the channel (dangerous sandbars are swept away by the fast-flowing water) I relaxed and placed my trust in captain and crew.

Locals refer to the Mekong as **Nam Khan (Mother River)** and believe that “Pla Buk,” or “Monster of the Mekong” is the reincarnation of fishermen who have drowned in its waters.

The legend most likely springs from a giant species of Mekong catfish that measures up to nine feet long and weighs up to 660 pounds, making it the largest freshwater fish in the world. Hill tribe fishermen in flat bottomed boats and youngsters wielding nets attached to long bamboo poles seemed intent on catching Pla Buk.



Captain Buys Catfish Northern Laos

Our captain also kept his eyes peeled for the mythical fish but his goal was more practical; spotting a fresh catch, he pulled alongside a wooden boat and dickered, eventually purchasing the flopping catfish for his family's dinner table for less than a dollar.

The Mekong's many faces mirror the **cultural diversity of Laos**, and cruising its sinuous course is one of the best ways for visitors to become acquainted with some of the country's 68 ethnic minorities.

Ethnologists classify these minorities into three groups.

The Lao Loum, or lowland people, comprise 60% of the population and generally inhabit rich farmlands and floodplains along the Mekong where they cultivate rice, vegetables and peanuts. They practice Theravada Buddhism, and wield much of the country's political power. Lao Loum are famous for their unhurried pace of life, summed up by the phrase "Bao pen nyang," no problem.

The second largest group is **Lao Theung, a Sino-Tibetan people** who inhabit the lower mountain slopes and practice slash and burn farming, growing coffee, glutinous rice and tobacco. Lao Theung constitute about a quarter of the population.

Finally, the **Lao Soung** live at higher elevations and include hill tribes like the Iko and Yao. Last to arrive in present day Laos, they were forced to occupy the least hospitable land in the country. Yet, large scale migration, new technology and infrastructure are rapidly blurring ethnic lines in Laos.

In the north, our boat stopped at a **Hmong village** where barefoot children careened down a towering sand hill to greet our boat and immediately began pestering us to buy handmade pouches and woven bracelets.



Hmong Children meet boat northern Laos

We trod up the blistering sands and peeked inside rudimentary bamboo huts tucked into the jungled hilltop. At one, tree branches tacked over the doorway signaled that unauthorized entry would cause the spirits of the house to flee, requiring the local Shaman to perform a restoration ceremony.

Yet on the opposite side of the compound, a brand new telephone pole held the promise of electricity and television, which will continue to alter a culture that has already eschewed traditional costumes for western dress.

At **Ban Baw**, another northern hill tribe village famous for its whisky production, Lao Loum, Shan, and Tai Lue live together in perfect harmony. They intermarry, communicate in Lao rather than their tribal languages, and have developed new

customs that incorporate beliefs from their respective cultures.

Three weeks later I stepped aboard a second river boat in southern Laos. Here the Mekong flowed a serene aquamarine around a profusion of miniature islands tufted with lush grasses, earning the area its nickname of **4,000 Islands**. Rather than slaloming through rapids, we cruised gently, our hull splitting the mirrored surface of the delta waters like a hot knife through butter.



Vat Phou Cruise Southern Laos

Villages along the river's southern stretches are more developed as they are accessible by roads, however the **Mekong remains a vital lifeline**, especially in monsoon season, when it overflows its banks and floods fields and roads, cutting off villages for months at a time.

Perhaps due to this cycle of inundation and receding water, superstitions persist.

Here the **endangered Irrawaddy dolphins** that inhabit waters off the **tip of Don Khon Island** are believed to be reincarnated fishermen who lost their lives while attempting to cross deadly rapids near a series of waterfalls found on this stretch of the Mekong.

In between the hill tribes and 4,000 Islands lie lovely **Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of Laos** during the days when the country was known as the Kingdom of a Million Elephants.



Wat Xieng Thong Luang Prabang

According to ancient legend, more than 1,000 years ago two hermit brothers who were combing the northern foothills for a spiritual retreat stumbled across the site of **Luang Prabang**. They predicted that the peaceful valley on the shores of the Mekong would

one day become the site of a powerful kingdom ruled by a succession of monarchs.

History bore out their prophecy. Dating from as early as the 6th century, Luang Prabang originally formed part of an early Mun principality named Muang Sua.

Five hundred years later, King Fa Ngum established the capital, which eventually held sway over Lao territory far south of the present day capital of Vientiane, as well as much of Cambodia, parts of China and Thailand.

Even **Vientiane**, which has to be one of the sleepest, most charming capital cities I have ever visited, sprawls along the shores of the Mekong and is the place where most tourists enter Laos, via the **Friendship Bridge**, which provides a convenient route for the thousands of Thais who visit Laos each year.



Girls fish in Mekong Ban Xiangdi 4000 islands

With more than ten years of traveling around SE Asia under my belt, Laos managed to surprise me. With its **exquisite scenery, friendly people, opulent temples, and mouth-watering food**, it quickly became my favorite destination in SE Asia.

If you can visit only one country in this part of the world **make it Laos**, and be sure to do it on a slow boat that sails the **mighty Mekong**.



After years of working 70-80 hours per week at jobs that paid the bills but brought no joy, a serious illness made Barbara Weibel realize she felt like the proverbial “hole in the donut” – solid on the outside but empty on the inside. After recovering her health, she walked away from her successful but unfulfilling career, sold or gave away most of her material possessions, donned a backpack and

began traveling around the world in pursuit the only things that had ever made her happy: travel, photography and writing. Five years later, she is still going strong and documenting her journey on her blog, [Hole In The Donut Cultural Travel](#). [Mekong Cruises](#) hosted Barbara Weibel on their Luang Say cruise in northern Thailand and their Vat Phou cruise in the 4,000 Islands area of southern Laos.

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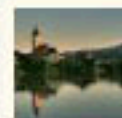
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