



THE METAMORPHOSIS OF *Vang Vieng*

A FORMER LAOS PARTY TOWN, VANG VIENG GOES
BACK TO ITS ROOTS. BY MARK ANDREWS



Opening image: Panoramic views from the Amari Vang Vieng Hotel.

Clockwise from right: A wooden hut in the limestone karst scenery in the countryside around Vang Vieng; Panoramic view across the Song River from the Silver Naga Hotel which hosts Yoga in Vang Vieng; Yoga atop a karst peak in Vang Vieng.

Darkness falls quickly this close to the equator. For about half an hour, silence comes to the Laotian jungle as the creatures of day and night change shifts. Soon the trail is near pitch black and I hit the knot of a tree making me dismount my mountain bike; the enveloped path now too treacherous an undertaking. Closing in are the sounds of the night starting with the cicadas but soon joined by other insects and untold beasts. Just minutes earlier we had been happily cycling through fields set amid the karst hills with the odd water buffalo for company.

When we arrive back in Vang Vieng the shop from where we hired the bikes is almost closed, while elsewhere the party scene is warming up. Back in 2012, this small central Laotian town of about 30,000 people hit notoriety with 27 deaths announced for 2011 and the subsequent loss of three young Australians in the first few months of the new year.

What had started off as a stop on the Banana Pancake Trail had given way to wanton hedonism in a scene not far off Colonel Kurtz's lair in *Apocalypse Now*. A de rigueur stop on the rite-of-passage gap year for so many young Australians and Europeans; foreigners lounged around in a drug-and-drink fuelled stupor watching reruns of *Friends* in bars; and cafés





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stocked with buckets of alcohol and happy menus that had nothing to do with a meal at McDonalds. This was after a hard day of floating down the river on a tractor tyre inner tube while stopping off at many bars on route. The Lao authorities stepped in, closing down many of the bars.

Now the Laotians are claiming the town back and transforming it by capitalising on its number one asset: the scenery. While it would be a lie to say the party is completely over, it is greatly diminished from its zenith in the early years of the decade. Both local and foreign investment is pouring in transforming the tourist scene, and there is no better evidence of this than the opening in March 2018 of the Amari Vang Vieng, the town’s first five-star property.

“We see Vang Vieng as a destination with lots of potential and poise for further growth over the coming years. Set between the capital Vientiane and popular city of Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng invites visitors to complete their Laos experience with its unique natural setting, which is what originally drew visitors here in the first place,” says Debrah Pascoe, senior vice president, commercial, ONYX Hospitality Group, the Thai company that owns the Amari brand.

While floating down the Nam Song River surrounded by karst hills, I can see the attraction of tubing. Early in the morning, we have the river to ourselves bar a water buffalo and her calf coming to refuel and the odd child shouting *sabaidee* (hello) from the spattering of wooden homes lining the banks. The craze started by accident when Thanongsi Sorangkoun from the Organic Farm gave volunteers old tractor inner tubes to float down the river as a way of relaxing. Soon bars sprang up every few hundred metres, creating conditions that often proved lethal.

“The town grew on backpacker power and local Lao investments, transforming their houses into guest rooms, expanding and building up four or five floors to make more rooms. The local people created businesses on demand for the tourists. There was no UNESCO or International agency to support the Local Government on how to do ecotourism in an ethical or environmentally sound way,” says Australian Rachel Dechaineux, who along with her Laotian husband Somphanh Sisourath, have been instrumental in helping change the tourist face of the town.



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The nationalities and investment attracted have come in waves. Dechaineux remembers it starting off with young Israelis fresh from military service in the early 2000s, which gave way to young Australians and Europeans. Around the middle of the decade there was a change. “There were glimpses of small European packages coming through Laos. To break up the trip between Luang Prabang and Vientiane they would stop at Vang Vieng, which is the halfway point on the road and most of them wanted to stay here and see the beautiful mountains,” says Dechaineux. Responding to the change, Dechaineux opened The Elephant Crossing Hotel in 2006, one of the first mid-range properties in the town, located along a peaceful stretch of the river.

Dechaineux, along with a handful of other hoteliers located nearby, were trailblazers in showing another way for the town, with Inthy Deuansavanh, founder of Green Discovery Laos, the country’s leading ecotourism company, another intent on moving the town in the right direction. Green Discovery Laos was the first operator to introduce kayaking to the river in 2000 at a time when the only other activity was tubing. “From that point, we have expanded our activities to trekking, caving, climbing and the ‘Vang Vieng Challenge’ – where our clients get to zipline down the mountainside after breaching a thrilling Via Ferrata,” says Deuansavanh.

Clockwise from above: Local long boats pass tourists kayaking on the Song River in Vang Vieng; Verdant countryside from a karst peak.

Deuansavanh notes that after the government closed many bars, there was a temporary drop in tourists with an influx of Thais and Chinese helping make up the numbers. After a Korean reality TV show, *Youth Over Flowers*, was made in Vang Vieng and with direct flights from Busan and Seoul to Vientiane, the number of Korean tourists exploded.

“The Koreans have invested a lot into infrastructure such as roads, renting guest houses, karaoke bars, four-wheel buggies and opened up large massage parlours all directed at the large tour groups,” says Dechaineux. The tour groups offer packages that include activities such as kayaking and quad biking.

More activities for tourists inclined to experience Vang Vieng for its beauty alone have also begun to spring up.

Villagers are getting in on the act, creating walking trails for which they charge a 10,000 Kip (AUD\$1.60) entrance fee. “It’s a community-based tourism initiative. Vang Vieng is designated as a nature tourism area and it’s been an objective of the local government to open up more treks,” says Dechaineux. Over the last year, more trails have sprung up, with villagers responsible for putting in and maintaining paths.

Two years ago, Dechaineux started one of her latest ventures, ‘Yoga in Vang Vieng’, which appeals to those interested in wellbeing. Held two or three times daily, the classes take place both in a studio and sometimes an outdoor *shala* in the rice fields across the river.

As I wait for the bus to leave Vang Vieng, I am next to the dusty old Lime Site 6 airstrip used by the Americans as part of the Secret War. Surprisingly, this is the area where the future of the town may lie. Already under construction and due to be completed by 2021, the Chinese are building a new railway



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line capable of speeds of up to 160 km/h, which will link the town with Vientiane and all the way up to the Chinese railway network at Mohan in China.

As Debrah Pascoe declares: "Vang Vieng is going to be the next must-visit destination in Laos and transition to where Luang Prabang is today. With its unique natural scenery, Nam Song River and the striking limestone mountains, there is a lot of beauty to discover." •

Photography by Mark Andrews and Alba Vitta.

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways flies to Bangkok from various Australian cities with onward flights to Vientiane. Qantas flies to Bangkok with connections to Vientiane with Bangkok Airways. Once in Laos, Vang Vieng is only reachable by road.

- Thai Airways: thaiairways.com
- Qantas: qantas.com
- Bangkok Airways: bangkokair.com

WHEN TO GO

The best weather is from November to February, the dry season.

WHERE TO STAY

- Amari Vang Vieng: amari.com/vang-vieng
- The Elephant Crossing Hotel: theelephantcrossinghotel.com

TOURS

Travel Bay has a range of group and private tours to Laos including a 10-day 'Local Life in Laos' private tour, an insight into local life with visits to small villages and rural areas combined with the highlights of Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng and Vientiane as well as the mysterious Plain of Jars. 1800-020-020; travelbay.com

THINGS TO DO

- Green Discovery Laos: greendiscoverylaos.com

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