

Mekong Musings in Laos February 2019

On the Mekong Musings trip to Laos, we started as we meant to go on, with dramatic scenery, the mighty Mekong and a stunning sunset over drinks and Lao snacks.

In February 2019, eight 5Ws from Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Germany and Japan, had an insight into traditions, Buddhism, crafts, and aspects of Laos that members may not have been able to see if they came by themselves. It was also an opportunity to contribute to local projects.

Laos practices Theravada Buddhism and we saw many young male novices, clad in orange robes. Organiser Sally, who lives in Luang Prabang, and her friend Korn wanted to demonstrate a woman's place in Lao Buddhism. Korn, a practising Buddhist, arranged an exclusive visit to a nunnery. We sat on floor cushions for a private audience with white-clothed Buddhist nuns, who encouraged us to let go of possessions, then hugged us and took selfies. Korn introduced us to the concept of understanding Buddhist awareness, with an unusual and delicious vegetarian lunch.

On a visit to the Community Centre, supported by Sally's charity, Laos Solidarity, the 5W women engaged local children with English games, art projects, origami, and sewing felt purses. The kids invited us to join in their traditional dance performance, after which the resident shaman welcomed us with an animist Baci ceremony, and the children tied white cotton thread around our wrists for good luck. On the way home, we visited women weavers in a local village and bought far too many silk scarves. Participants also gave Lao conversation lessons at the English school run by 5W Jeannette, and some returned to volunteer, always a thrill for the Lao students.

We arrived in style at the waterfalls on our own private boat and first visited behind the scenes at "Free the Bears", a charity that rescues endangered Moon Bears from bile-farming. Who would have thought we'd have ended up hiding treats for them, then watching them shake tree trunks to get at pieces of papaya? After walking up to the stupendous waterfall, we lunched at a restaurant where most of us slid into a natural limestone swimming pool of turquoise water. At a small farm, Angela milked a buffalo, we all gave bull Ferdinand a shower, and had the enthusiastic baby buffalo sucking the teats off the bottles. There was an afternoon with elephants, walking with them through the forest and making them healthy snacks, which they curled their salivating trunks to get at - we all ended up covered in elephant dribble.

Some of you may have seen the BBC documentary about the Library Boat runs by Luang Prabang Library. Usually the public cannot go, but Sally arranged a day trip to a remote village of 80+ kids. The 5W women enthusiastically entertained the kids with English action songs and joined in the games. Pam was a particularly good football player. We also took tuk-tuks, lorries, jeeps and vans to our various destinations – but the best was a slow boat back to Luang Prabang with the sun setting in the stern and the moon rising over the bow – magical.

ContinuedLaos is known for its traditional handicrafts, and we made natural dyes from plants, shakily drew Hmong batik, and learnt to weave our very own piece of Lao silk on a traditional wooden loom in a craft centre. Two Hmong ladies taught us the slow art of embroidery – and patience. We made mulberry-bark paper decorated with delicate blue flowers and Buddha masks from elephant-dung paper – no, it doesn't smell. It helped us appreciate the backbreaking work that goes into the crafts available at the night market – and to recognise the shoddy copies.



5Ws at waterfall

We could hardly move after eating the delicious Lao lunch we cooked ourselves, after an interesting, and sometimes shocking, trip to the food market. Dried bamboo rat anyone? We also visited a farm where we learnt the whole process of making rice noodles. From ploughing the field, knee-deep in mud behind the buffalo, to planting threshing, and grinding rice, the 5Ws were in there. We made rice dough, and pushed it through a stringer into a cauldron of boiling water over an open fire. Wow, we worked hard for that meal.

So many different foods passed our lips: a Lao barbeque where we cooked strip of meat on a red-hot metal circle, a romantic French picnic on the boat, stuffed lemongrass, and a silkworm's diet of mulberry leaves, albeit in a tempura and dipped in wild honey. Not forgetting the Japanese tea-ceremony, which Akemi offered to demonstrate as part of the 5W sharing of cultures and to celebrate Kathie's birthday. And on our last night, Sally and Jeannette's friend invited us to her home for a fabulous homecooked meal, admiring a massive sunset over the river. Mekong Musings indeed.



5Ws Book Boat



In the weaving village



Akemi sharing the tea ceremony