

Exploring the Bolovens Plateau

by Ben Davies

In a remote corner of southern Laos, vast tracts of rain forest crowd in on enchanting waterfalls, jungle rivers, and the villages of ethnic tribes. I ventured into this isolated region for a six-day tour travelling by vintage car, bus, boat, and elephant.

The car that ferried us into southern Laos from the Thai border town of Chongmek was not like other vehicles. It had masking tape holding its doors together, a cracked windscreen and an engine that made the sound of a jumbo jet at take-off. The brakes were of a similar vintage to the rusty exterior (it was an ancient Morris Minor). Every time the driver wanted to slow down, he would pump-prime the brakes with a great flourish of his diminutive legs, allowing us to drift to a gradual standstill.

This unsatisfactory state of affairs lasted for some 20 minutes as we drove at a snail's pace through some of the grandest countryside imaginable. Then the inevitable happened. Crossing a single-lane bridge, we encountered an oncoming vehicle. Once again our driver went into pumping position. But this time to no avail. Slowly, inevitably, we advanced until with a neat little crunch we hit the approaching vehicle, coming to a sudden halt over a dried-up river bed in the middle of nowhere.

Travelling in southern Laos is full of such surprises. First of all there's the almost complete lack of tourist infrastructure (at present there's only a handful of operators that put together trips as far as Attapu, using private

RIGHT We trundle off into the jungle sitting behind the elephant's mahout, or driver, on the bamboo seat that's strapped around the elephant's girth

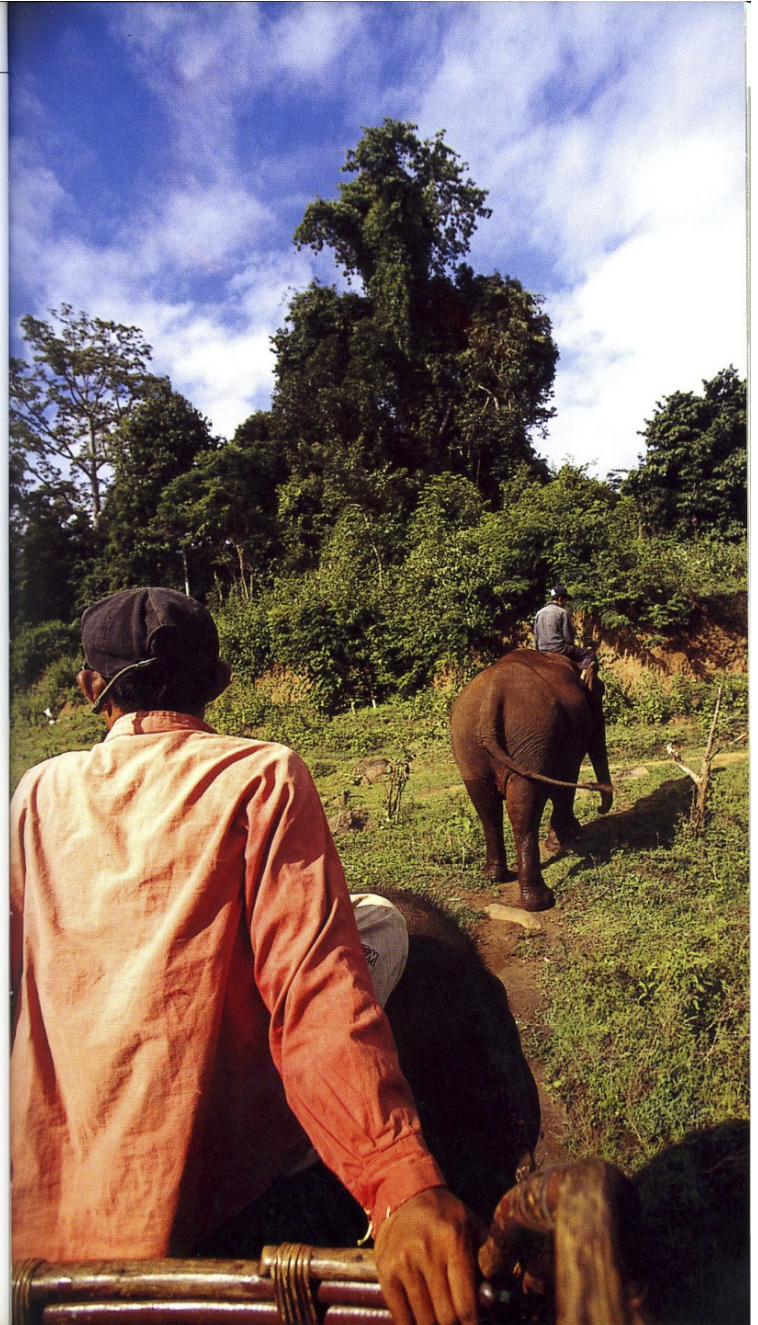
transport). Then there's the primitive nature of the hotels, where you must often share bathrooms and even squat over toilets. Finally there's the Lao people's remarkable lack of urgency, which means that things seldom work out quite the way you expect them to.

But if you want to travel to one of the most remote and beautiful countries in Asia, Laos is the place to choose. Here you will find not only magnificent scenery, jungle rivers, ethnic tribes, and fine waterfalls, but also some of the friendliest people and one of the richest cultures imaginable. Most of all, you will find the real spirit of adventure that is fast disappearing even in the furthest

4 In the monsoon season, between June and the end of September, expect to get out and push cars or even buses over appalling stretches of road. At other times of year, abundant mosquitoes and lengthy boat and bus rides are also an inevitable part of this magnificent adventure.

★ You won't find too much in the way of creature comforts on this route, except at the pleasant resort in Tad Lo (where bungalows overlook the waterfall) or in the incongruous-looking Champassak Palace Hotel in Pakse. Elsewhere, expect basic rooms with mosquito nets and shared bathrooms. Because any tourist infrastructure is almost wholly absent, it is best to organize a guide and transport in advance (see Contacts).

✂ Comfortable walking boots are recommended, along with swimming gear, sun protection, and hat (for the boat trip).



SOUTHEAST ASIA

flung corners of Southeast Asia.

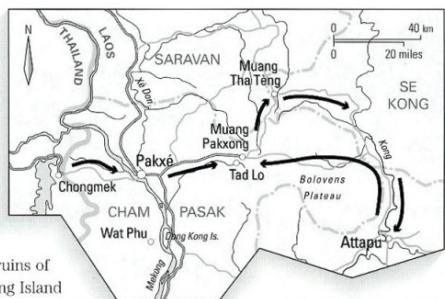
BANKS AND BUSES

The town of Pakxe lies at the confluence of the Mekong River and the Don River, within easy reach of the famous Khmer ruins of Wat Phu and Dong Kong Island (see pages 100–9). It is a town of clashing styles with a colourful central market, surrounded by ugly new shop-houses and faded colonial villas. Established by the French as an administrative post in 1905, it has few attractions itself other than as a transit point for road and river traffic.

In the local bank, we change our money into the memorable local currency known as the Lao Kip. Its biggest distinction is the sheer volume of paper: a \$50 note comes back as a stack of notes the size of a paving stone.

From Pakxe, we catch a three-wheeled motorized contraption known as a jumbo to the bus terminal, which lies 2km (1¼ miles) to the southeast of town. Now if you imagine buses to be modern, roadworthy vehicles with reclining seats and air-conditioning, think again. Typically, a minimum of 70 passengers squeeze into rows of wooden seats (literally planks) designed for a maximum of 30 people. Two dozen more passengers then sit on top of the bus, merrily clutching on to an assortment of baskets, vegetables, and spare tyres.

Every time one of these remarkable vehicles approaches a police station, it will screech to a halt at the side of the road, so that the passengers who are sitting illegally on top of the bus can clamber inside. Then as soon as the vehicle has lurched past the checkpoint, it stops again to allow the passengers to climb back on to the roof like monkeys in the jungle.



The Bolovens Plateau

From Pakxe, it's a stunning two-and-a-half-hour drive northeast to the village of Tad Lo, which lies at the foot of the Bolovens Plateau, on the border of Saravan and Champassak provinces.

At the small turn-off, we stagger off the bus in a blissful state of relief and follow the dirt track that winds its way through the village past grunting pigs and clucking chickens to the **Tad Lo** Resort and waterfalls, signposted 1.5km (1 mile) away.

ELEPHANTS AND WATERFALLS

Set among shady trees overlooking the burbling Tad Hang waterfall, the collection of simple (if over-priced) bungalows belonging to the Tad Lo Resort provide an ideal base from which to explore the surrounding region by foot—or elephant.

We rise at first light the following day, wandering down to the water's edge for a swim in the Xe Xet (pronounced Houai Set) River. After a breakfast of French bread and omelette at the resort restaurant, it's off for another Tad Lo speciality: elephant riding.

At the pre-appointed time (7am), our two mahouts (elephant drivers) arrive at the resort on their large four-legged protégés—one a 40-year-old elephant with an unquenchable appetite for sugar cane and palm fronds, and the other her half-tonne younger sister. To climb on board these jungle giants is easy.

EXPLORING THE BOLOVENS PLATEAU

From the second floor of the resort, you simply place one foot on to the elephant's head, and then with the help of the mahout lower yourself down on the two-person bamboo seats that are tied fast around their enormous girths. Then we are off, swaying along a dirt path that leads south, before fording the river to the picturesque villages and lush jungle vegetation beyond.

Elephants in Laos are something of a national symbol. Indeed, in the latter part of the 14th century, under the Lao prince Fa Ngoun, the country was known as Lane Xang, "Land of a Million Elephants." These days, these awesome and majestic creatures are somewhat less in evidence (only 3,000 Asiatic elephants—smaller than the African variety—are believed to live in the wild). But our two lumbering sisters provide a pleasant reminder of glorious times past.

By the time the sun is directly overhead, the novelty of elephant riding is beginning to wane, and so we return to the beautiful restaurant at Tad Lo Resort for a lunch of coq au vin (not recommended), fried rice and fruit, followed by a lazy afternoon swim in the shady pool above the **Tad Hang waterfall**.

RATS AND BATS

Whether it's food or drink, Laos has a few of its own unique specialities that rank alongside some of the world's most unusual gastronomic forms of sustenance. For drink, try *Beer Lao* or *lao lao*, a potent local rice whiskey. For something even stronger, ask for *choum*, a ferociously powerful spirit made from fermented bananas and stored in jars out of which it is imbibed using straws. Then there are a few Lao delicacies you are unlikely to find at home, such as barbecued rat, roasted bat, or pig's intestine soup. For more conservative eaters, there are noodles, fresh fish, and other mundane dishes.

ETHNIC TRIBES

If elephants are one Tad Lo speciality, ethnic tribes are the other. So the following morning in the company of Souk, our irrepressible Lao guide who speaks Thai (but not English), we go in search of these diminutive people. In total, Laos is home to some 45 ethnic minorities, of which 12 are found in the vicinity of Tad Lo. These range from the Alak (an Austro-Indonesian ethnolinguistic group) to the Nge, the Xouei, and the Ta-oy.

Don't expect to find colourful costumes, however. While these seminomadic people, known collectively as the Lao Theung, have kept many of their traditions and superstitions intact (the Alak test the prospects of a marriage by killing a chicken, for example), they generally wear sarongs and a T-shirt. They live in small thatched huts often distinguished by their rounded roofs.

One of the most fascinating of the ethnic groups is the Katou, a Mon-Khmer tribe who moved to the plateau during the 1960s and 1970s to escape the American bombings of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the east. According to Souk, these shy people, who are famous for their brightly coloured *paisin* or sarongs, sacrifice up to six buffalo every year (in February or March) in a costly ritual aimed at appeasing the spirits.

If you don't have a guide (it's best to arrange one in advance through Sotetour in Pakxe, see Contacts), don't despair. You can take a pleasant two-hour walk along the narrow trail that leads upriver past the upper Tad Lo falls to the villages of Baan Tad Soon and Baan Kien Tang Le. From the main road (near the bus stop), you can also recross the bridge and visit some of the surrounding villages on the river bank, stopping for a swim as you go. However, the Lao government has banned tourists from overnighting in the local villages, so you have little choice but to return to Tad Lo at the end of the day.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the evening, as the sun goes down behind the hills, we sit out on the resort terrace listening to the croaking of tree frogs, the chattering of cicadas, and the distant sound of water cascading down the falls below.

RIVER JOURNEY

Christened the "coffee route" by the French settlers who came here in the 1920s and 1930s, the road from Tad Lo to Tha Teng and Sekong takes you through some of the most fertile countryside on Earth. The region's elevation (1,200m/4,000 feet above sea level), along with its mild climate, have made it ideal not only for arabica and robusta coffee, but for teak, cardamom and even durian, the infamous oval fruit prized for its aphrodisiac qualities.

Despite the recent monsoon, which has turned parts of the route into mud slides (we get out to push on two

occasions), it takes little more than an hour to reach Tha Teng (35km/22 miles) and then it's a further two hours to the town of Sekong in the remote eastern region of the country.

Overnighting in Sekong, an ugly brick town best known for its luminous green-painted cockroaches that are hung on bits of string in the market, we set off with our guide the following morning for the biggest thrill of the entire journey—a ride down the **Kong River**.

To rent a boat, or more accurately a motorized canoe, to Attapu costs around \$10–15 per person (minimum \$40 per boat) and the journey takes about six or seven hours. But it is worth every minute, cutting through remote jungles and cliffs inhabited only by minority tribes (it was long rumoured that U.S. soldiers listed as missing in action during the Vietnam war were held here).



At times we cross over sudden rapids, at times there is so little water that we must almost push the canoe through the narrow gorges that rise from the banks of the river.

By late afternoon, it is raining and the countryside is all but obscured beneath a thick veil. Ahead the river curves around the hills for the last time. To stretch our cramped legs, we draw alongside dry land and climb out on to the mud banks of the Kong River, framed by the distant mountains of the Bolovens Plateau.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

It's dusk when we arrive in the town of **Attapu**, perched on the confluence of the Kong and Sekhama rivers. Known to the Lao as "Garden Town" after its magnificent setting of flowered lanes and lush tropical plants, this picturesque

ABOVE A dozen of Laos's 45 semi-nomadic ethnic minorities live in villages accessible from Tad Lo
LEFT A typically well-laden bus stops near Attapu

town, which until two years ago was out of bounds to tourists, is one of the great unknown destinations of Laos.

Attapu has neither smart hotels nor nightclubs (we stay in the spartan Tavivan guest house). After 10pm, when the generators are switched off, it does not even have electricity. But what the town lacks in modern infrastructure, it makes up for in charm, with its quaint old wooden houses, its rustic inhabitants who wash in the river alongside the water buffalo, and its lively morning market selling rattan baskets, monstrous-sized fish, and a multitude of bananas in all shapes and sizes.

If you learn just one phrase in Lao, make sure that it's "*sabai dee*". This literally means good day and is the polite form of greeting. If you say it with sufficient enthusiasm, it may also win you friends.

To the east of Attapu, near the Vietnam border, lies the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. Extending through the hills and jungles of Cambodia and Laos, it provided the main supply route for Vietnamese communist forces fighting the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese. By the time the war ended in 1975, more than one million tonnes of bombs had been dropped on this area, the biggest tonnage dropped per square kilometre in history. Even now, more than 20 years later, unexploded bombs litter the border area and you are strongly advised not to travel too far afield without a guide.

We spend little more than a day exploring the beautiful lush countryside and the waterfalls around Attapu, pressured by lack of time and the persistent monsoon rains. These now threaten the nearby roads with landslides, raising the prospect that we could be stuck here for at least another couple of days, cut off from the outside world.

OVER THE MOUNTAINS

From Attapu, there's only one way to get back to Pakxe: by a spectacular but

tortuous route (180km/112 miles) that twists and turns through the mountainside with magnificent views first of ricefields, then of jungle-clad mountains and finally of lush coffee plantations. Twice we get out of our vintage bus: once to allow the bus driver to cross a flooded river bed and another time so that he can change a tyre that has been reduced to ribbons by the sharp boulders.

But this seven-hour bus trip is not just a test of human endurance. It provides an insight into one of the greatest natural problems now confronting Laos. Along some stretches of the route, vast tracts of monsoon forest (mainly Asian rosewood, teak, and other hardwoods) have been hacked out of the jungle. Ostensibly the clearing is to make way for new settlements and for coffee and fruit plantations. But there is another more sinister reason. Officially, Laos's forest resources are being depleted at less than 0.9 per cent a year, one of the lowest levels of any country in the region. Unofficially the figure could be as high as 4 per cent, as a result of large-scale and often illegal logging.

For a glimpse of one of the highest waterfalls in the whole of Laos, we jump off the bus at Ban Pak Kud (next to the KM38 sign, a 20-minute drive west of Pakxong). From here **Tad Phan** is signposted on the left hand side (1km/½mile) at the end of a track that leads past coffee plantations. Tad Phan tumbles an astonishing 130m (430 feet) down the mountainside and is a place of considerable beauty. But beware: the mud paths down to the falls are steep and slippery, and should not be attempted under any circumstances in the rainy season.

From Pakxong, we catch a pick-up truck known as a *songthaew* (literally two rows) for the final leg of our journey down Highway 23 to Pakxe, the end of our adventure through one of Asia's last great frontiers.

GOING IT ALONE

INTERNAL TRAVEL

Get to Pakxe either by air (there are twice-daily flights from Vientiane) or by road via the Thai border crossing at Chongmek.

If you are travelling from Bangkok, the easiest and most pleasant way to get to Pakxe is to fly to Ubon Ratchathani in northeast Thailand, from where you can hire a taxi at the airport to take you as far as Chongmek. Once you have crossed the border into Laos, ancient buses and vintage cars ferry passengers to Meum Khao, from where it's a 10-minute hop over the river to Pakxe.

From Pakxe, buses run to Tad Lo, Sekong, and Attapu. Many of the roads, however, are in appalling condition, especially during the rainy season.

WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit southern Laos is between October and the beginning of February, when the skies are clear and temperatures range from 15 to 30°C (59–86°F).

From the end of February to May, temperatures often exceed 35°C (95°F) and the Kong River can be impassable by boat.

From June to the end of September is the rainy season, when tropical downpours alternate with fine days. At this time of year, some stretches of road around Attapu and Sekong are extremely difficult to negotiate without a four-wheel-drive vehicle. The landscape, however, is at its most beautiful and tourist numbers are minimal.

PLANNING

Prior to your arrival in Laos you will need a tourist visa. These can be obtained through travel agents in Bangkok (this generally takes two days) or at the Lao embassy.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in Pakxe ranges from the upmarket but ugly Champassak Palace Hotel to several basic hotels and guest houses. In Tad Lo, there's the pleasant Tad Lo Resort, although you should make an advance reservation through SodeTour. Elsewhere in Sekong and Attapu, accommodation is extremely basic.

FINDING A GUIDE

SodeTour organize tours or tailor-made trips to Tad Lo, Sekong, and Attapu using four-wheel-drive vehicles, which can negotiate the roads all year round.

You may also be able to negotiate a guide to travel with you by bus, although in high season you are

strongly advised to make arrangements in advance.

You can rent a car and driver from the Champassak Palace Hotel for around \$50–70 a day. SodeTour also rents out cars and drivers.

While it is quite possible to travel to Sekong and Attapu on your own, the lack of tourist infrastructure can make the journey at best time-consuming and at worst unpleasant.

WHAT TO TAKE

- Warm clothes. (November–February).
- Waterproof bags.
- Map and compass.
- Walking boots.
- Sleeping sheet.
- Water bottle.
- Toiletries and tissues.
- A torch and matches.

HEALTH MATTERS

- Take anti-malaria tablets.
- Use mosquito repellent and coils.
- Wear trousers and long-sleeved shirts at night.
- Bring a basic health kit.
- Arrange full medical insurance prior to departure.

TRAVELLERS' TIPS

- To get the best out of your trip, arrange a guide in advance.
- Time is a flexible commodity in Laos. Things rarely happen quite when they are supposed to.
- As a rule of thumb, boats and buses leave at dawn and arrive before dusk.
- Change only small amounts of foreign money into Lao Kip at one time, as many hotels prefer payment in U.S. dollars.
- On arrival in Pakxe and Attapu, you are advised to register with the local immigration officials at the police station.
- Don't expect people to speak English. If you are determined to go it alone, take a dictionary.
- During the rainy season from June to September, allow plenty of extra time if you are going by public transport, as roads in the south can be extremely difficult.