



Eco Adventure at **KAMU LODGE**

If you are looking for an eco experience Kamu Lodge in Laos puts you close to the land and offers an up close and personal look at the life of the people who live here, writes **Floyd Cowan**

The ducks had gone to sleep. The bullfrogs had awoken to the buzz of insects in the slowly darkening evening.

One of Kamu Lodge's staff went along the wooden board walk lighting the oil lamps that flickered to life and brought a dim glow that strengthened as the evening darkened.

On the River

After a three and a half hour boat trip up the Mekong River from Luang Prabang, Laos, we had walked up the path through the trees and came to a clearing where we could view Kamu Lodge that is set in a bowl on a slope amongst lush rice paddies. A richer natural green I don't think I've ever seen. The constant squalls

that came over the mountain kept the paddies full with water where the ducks swam. They are natural insecticides as they eat the bugs that would eat the growing rice.

A great expanse of nature had been the order of the day since early morning in Luang Prabang when Farah and I took the steps down to the Mekong River to the long thin wooden boat that had the pilot and the pilot's wife, and two to three year old daughter of inestimable energy, and Lee. Lee worked for Kamu Lodge, but he only went there when there were guests, so during the mid part of the year, when the rains came in torrents and the tourists don't he spends most of his time in Luang Prabang.

Going up river was a long slow process,

with the scenery changing slowly. The green clad hills rolling closer, climbing higher and showing patches of civilization in its crevices on occasion. I chatted with Lee, who eagerly answered my many questions, and told us about the caves we would soon be visiting. The journey up river, with the stop at the caves, was 3 ½ hours. Going back was less than two.

The Buddha Cave

“Would you like tea or coffee?” he asked. We drank green tea while he told us about the Buddha, Ting and Pakou Cave. “Prior to Buddhism coming to Laos people worshiped in the caves, they animists, but there are none of the images left. Now they make offerings in the Buddha Cave – the first cave. Ting Cave is 250 steps up the hill.” Pakou Cave was too far for us to visit on our schedule. “Before 1925,” Lee said, “the Lao Kings would go to the cave to clean the statues.”

The ticket was 20,000 kip (US\$2.50) for tourists, which Kamu Lodge paid, and 10,000

kip for the Lao people.

The Buddha Cave is a great location, looking over the Mekong, a place that many statues call home. From there we climbed the steps to Ting Cave which is very dark and requires a flashlight to explore (rentals available). The air was very close and humid. I am not sure if it was the dark or mysticism, but it was an intriguing place to be in. Though fewer idols were idling about than in Buddha Cave there was a feeling that the place had a past that was seeping into the present.

Walking down the steps at a leisurely pace, allows one to enjoy the views of the Mekong and the surrounding hills.

A Warm Kamu Welcome

We had another hour travelling up the thick opaque river, the colour of toffee. “There are no dangerous critters in these waters,” Lee informed us. If there were, it would have been very difficult to see them.

The porters took our luggage to our luxury tent while we went to lounge in the middle of

the rice paddy. I was a bit surprised at sudden rustling amongst the rice stocks as the ducks hustled to get away from us. Oliver Trafeal, the new manager of Kamu Lodge greeted us. He was only two months on the job, and was working hard to get it up to his standards. In the tropics it is always a challenge keeping a facility in good repair, and in the humid wilderness I can believe that the challenges are even greater. The thatched roofs alone, as beautiful as they are, need frequent attention and Oliver told me they had just repaired the restaurant roof.

We lingered over the generous portions of the lunch we were served in the open restaurant in the middle of the field. A French family of five were at another table, the only other guests in this pristine wilderness.

A Comfortable Tent

As we nibbled on dessert, appear and mango, we watched the staff come and go – most from the nearby Kamu Village, which climbed up the slopes that overlooked the Mekong.





Our accommodation is a very comfortable tent with a concrete floor. There is an on-suite bathroom with toilet and shower. The twin beds have mosquito nets over them and we are careful to keep the zipper closed on the front flaps, but to my surprise, not once during the two days I was there did I get a mosquito bite. Certainly the

coils and repellent were a help. Make sure you pack yours when you visit.

We enjoyed our free time after lunch, and with thunder rolling overhead I was reluctant to get out of bed after a nice nap. I'd been up since 6:00am photographing the monks in Luang Prabang as they went on their morning rounds.

No Lingering Lee

But enthusiastic Lee wasn't about to let us linger about. We were there to experience more than the inside of the tent – no matter how accommodating it was. Along with the French family of five, Lee instructed us on how to use the crossbow that is used by the locals for hunting. Unlike the pomelo that we used for a target, I would not like to be on the receiving end of the little pointed stick that flies with some speed.

After we all took several turns, our aim improving with each shot, we headed off to Kamu Village with Lee giving the commentary: "There are 324 people in 80 families who live in this village. There are two different tribes, the La Lu, who are Buddhist, and the minority. The Kamu who are animists, were the other, larger, group. In 2000 the government relocated them into one village."

Getting Along

"How do they get along?"

"They get along fine. Occasionally they intermarry, but usually they only marry within their own tribe. Most are farmers. They plant rice, corn, hops and sesame," Lee noted. "There are 36 people who work at Kamu Lodge. Every time we take groups through the village on a tour Kamu Lodge gives them money, so they are quite happy to see tourists. They don't mind you taking their picture."

We crossed a thin bridge over a shallow gully with a small stream, past thatched roofed homes around which people were going about their work. Some with piles of peanuts that they were drying. Others were weaving, making baskets for rice.

At the school, which was closed for the summer, we stopped while Lee continued: "This is the primary school, for children six to twelve years old. For secondary and high school students they take a 25 to 30 minute boat ride to the next village where they attend school, and stay there for the week."



Friendly People

We chatted with the friendly kids who greeted us. At a small store one half had such things as pop, shampoo, cigarettes and rice wine. In the other half were items for tourists such as baskets, metal pots, spear guns, arrows and net bags.

The French family of five bought a spear gun for 50,000 kip and six spears at two for 5,000 kip. They were only going to take five though they had paid for six.

We climbed the slope to the highest point in the village where a small hut was emitting a lot of music. It was a party house with the speakers taking up almost as much room as the half dozen people who were sitting, drinking, smoking, talking and laughing. They were drunk friendly, offering us the rice wine that had gotten them inebriated in the middle of the day. One lady shook hands with all of us. We all had a sip of the slightly rough drink.

Bells of the Buddhists

We returned down the hill and passed the Buddhist Temple – very much in the Lao style. There were two bells by the temple. The metal bell is rung three times a day to signal to the village that it is time to bring the novice monks, who only stayed there every other

month, their meal. The wooden bell is rung twice a day to signal that it is time to pray.

At 7:00pm we strolled along the board walk towards the lounge that looked up the slope at the restaurant and the terraced fields above it. I was again startled by the ducks fleeing as we approached. We had a drink in the lounge, enjoying the very peaceful ambience as the oil lamps that framed the paths brought a flickering yellow light to the night.

Our first dinner at the Lodge was the best. Sticky rice and white rice were served along with a chicken curry, a beef dish, sweet and sour veggies and breaded fish that was followed by fruit – as were all meals.

A Great Performance

Chatting with Oliver he told us that there were 20 rooms at Kamu Lodge, five of which were under renovation. Then he said, “Let’s go down to the activities area. The local children are going to put on a performance for us.”

A large log fire was burning in the area of where we had pummelled the pomelo. We took to the bench seat while the group of students stood in the dark on the opposite side of the fire. The teacher explained the programme – which Lee translated into English. They would sing some

songs, do a few dances and then does the bamboo jump. The children were very sweet as they sang and danced, but then things got going when they brought out the bamboo poles.

Two lads held opposite ends of the poles which they clapped together in rhythm. The dancers jumped in and out of the poles, trying to avoid getting their foot clamped between them. It was easy when they started slowly, but the speed increased faster and faster. Some of them were able to keep it up at a rapid pace while others tumbled out early.

Getting Involved

The French family of five got into it too. With the children laughing and shouting they gave it their best, and didn’t do too badly. The two older children got quite good at it, while the mother and youngest boy, about 10, didn’t really quite get the hang of it. The father, like myself, was content to take pictures.

The performance ended with a good night song by the children. There was a lot of good feeling as people made their way home. The following night there were more guests, but none of them got involved in the bamboo dance and the evening fell a bit flat compared to this night.

Lee and Oliver discussed with us our activities for the following day. “Normally,” Lee explained, “we would go



on a trek, but we can't go tomorrow because the boat driver says he has no gas."

"I've never heard of this," Oliver said with derisive gesture.

Another Cave

"We could hike to the cave," Lee suggested. "It is a bit muddy – it is not so good in the rainy season, but it should be okay."

Both Farah and I woke early in the morning, neither of us had a good sleep. Farah seemed reluctant to get out of bed until I said, "They'll have coffee."

"Really," she responded. Now she was motivated.

Over coffee Lee and I discussed the trip. "It'll take about half an hour to get there. It will be a bit muddy and there is a bit of a climb at one point, but it is not too steep."

He was exactly right. For the most part the trail was easy, but narrow so I always had to watch each step. It hadn't rained much so the ground was quite good – not too sloppy. Except in a few places and when I did slip there was very little I could do about it but slide.

Stick to Me

The hill was a little steeper than I had expected and slippery. I found the mud to be a good adhesive that was difficult to clean. Sticking to the bottom of my shoes it made it more difficult to walk.

At the top of the hill we stopped near a small hut where a log fire was smouldering. We were on the edge of a rice paddy that



went down a steep slope. The rice was close to harvesting, and I was glad I wasn't the one working that patch.

We crossed the slope and followed the path between tall trees and big rocks. A short distance to the narrow opening of the cave. Lee had the advantage of being small, and of having been there before. Standing outside the entrance that dropped sharply into the dark I really wasn't inclined to go in, but did follow once Lee led the way.

A Brief Visit

Our flashlights illuminated a drab space that could have done with a little interior decorating. The only effort to make it homely – two small



Buddhist statues – had gone for not as someone had knocked their heads off.

The dank air smelled of guano, but the bats weren't home today, though they had been on Lee's previous visit, three days earlier. Once inside I was comfortable, but just as happy to get out into the fresh air, so it wasn't a long visit.

On the return walk it began to rain with enough energy that I had to pull

out my umbrella. It wasn't the easiest to navigate through the narrow path with branches and vines grabbing at it, while the wind tried to blow it away. We came across a group of people who'd been gathering wood and one lady had a good solution – a large leaf which she held over her head.

Farewell to the Five

Back at the tent as I was peeling off my wet and muddy clothes I thought that the appeal of the cave was the difficulty getting in and out. Otherwise there wouldn't have been much point to the visit.

At lunch we were joined by a new group of people and the boat that brought them took the French family of five back to Luang Prabang.

Rice planting, panning for gold and fishing were the planned activities for the afternoon. I enjoyed sinking barefooted into the thick mud and planting stocks of rice – not that I wanted to make a career out of it. Panning for gold and fishing would have been more my choices as you can see the results immediately. In my case I got nothing.


The Mekong refused to serve up anything. I swished the mud around in the big pan, but all the dirt just ran away leaving nothing of value. I tossed the fishing net three times and each time it came back empty. Neither gold nor fish were bountiful.

Not Just For Decoration

I found it interesting as the fisherman guided me in bundling the net in my hand, holding it the right way and then throwing it as far as I could out into the stream. The Kamu who was showing me how to do it had caught a fish on his first cast, but it was small and he threw it back.

When the group went for their tour of the village I sat in the lounge and wrote in my notebook. A girl with a basket came from the village and wandered through the field picking greens. A man carrying a woven cage started chasing the ducks through

the paddies and when he caught one it was thrust inside the cage. Now I understood the flurry anytime I got close to a duck. They knew that they were not there just for decoration.

I enjoyed the time at Kamu Lodge as it gave real opportunities to get close to nature and to the people who lived on the land. It is a very beautiful location, and even if you don't fully engage yourself in the activities you can have a good time, just chilling out. If you do get involved you can have a really excellent time while learning about the Kamu people and their ways. 

Kamu Lodge Office

44/3 Ban Wat Nong, Kham Kong Rd,
Luang Prabang Lao P.D.R.

T: (856 71) 260 319

Mob: (856 30) 5 140 315 / (856 20) 6 032 365

info@kamulodge.com

www.kamulodge.com

