

Trekking In Laos

A Cultural Immersion

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Pigs paw, snort and snarl

as they bed-down for the night against the sides of a Laos village home-stay hut. The only separation between our heads and the free-roaming herd are palm frond walls and a single row of upended and half-buried BeerLao bottles ringing the hut's base.

On top of the pigs' cantankerous preparations, the village shaman's drum beat, calling ancestral spirits to mend a toddler's broken arm and cure a man's cancer. Turning over, searching for a patch of yet discovered softness on the hard sleeping platform, I watch shadows move like scampering beetles across the overhead rafters as the moon slips in and out of monsoon clouds. I'm exhausted but unwilling to let sleep steal any of this adventure.

No roads lead to Ban Yod Long, a village belonging to Laos' Lanten ethnic group, only narrow jungle trails. To get there, my two daughters and I hike more than 15 kilometers through Nam Ha National Bio-Diversity Conservation Area, located in the northern part of the country, just south of the Chinese border. The trail begins at a village belonging to the Khmu, another one of Laos' more than 150 ethnic groups.

Crossing a creek on a swinging bridge, Ava, 10, waves to a girl riding a water buffalo.

"So-bai-dee," she shouts. "Hello" in Lao.

Holding onto the buffalo with one hand, the girl waves back. "Sobaidee," she says.

Ava beams with a smile that tells me she's halfway to making friends and a smidgeon from a water buffalo ride invite. Hiking in Laos is pure cultural immersion - we stay with a village family, experience their way of life, tread lightly and, well, go away.

The trail twines around huts with laundry draped over porch rails, this being a rare sunny day. Hunting for spurs that will take us to the buffalo-riding girl, we pass a clump of smaller huts built on metal ringed stilts. This is the villagers' bank, where they store their rice crop, says our guide Keo, for the metal keeps the food safe from pillaging rats.

We're lucky, four guides accompany us: a regional guide, a Khmu village guide, a guide-in-training and Keo, who will travel with us throughout our Laos trip. All are eager to interpret Lao culture. We don't disappoint: we pepper them with questions.

"Do you think the other village's kids will be this friendly?" Ava asks.

The jungle envelopes us as we leave the Khmu village, lamenting a lost opportunity to ride a buffalo.

"Careful here," Lyda, my older daughter says, as she picks her way across a particularly wide muddy patch.

Thick, gooey ooze squishes over my tennis shoes. The trail is pock-marked from water buffalo use, their hooves treading in the same hole, journey after journey. The monsoon rains, rain so hard that I must walk with my head down for fear my contacts will wash away, have filled their tracks with muddy water. I walk gingerly on the ground between hoof holes, trying hard to find firm perches under the muddy top layer. It's slow going.

I look for respite, a switch-back or two, where I can pause during our climb to a ridge, but find none. The trail takes a straight shot to the top, with several thousand feet gain in elevation. Vegetation is thick: giant bamboo, banana tree groves and trees with spiny trunks. I grab hold of branches, checking first for nasty prickles, to help climb.

On the rare downhill, I ski on mud, feeling like a novice green skier trapped

on double-black diamond slopes. My bamboo walking sticks are poor guides as I slip and slide, and my hands and butt soon are filthy from frequent falls.

I learn to keep going. When I halt to catch my breath, guzzle water or snap photos, leeches - two-inch, worm-like creatures standing vertical, probing for their next blood meal - latch onto my shoes and inch their way to skin.

"Not much further, 20 minutes until ridge and big view," our regional guide says.

Ava cheers but Lyda and I have learned not to trust backcountry guides. Time is plastic in Laos. Twenty minutes may mean just that or longer ... often much longer. My heart pounds and my clothes stick to me from the oppressive heat. I tie my long hair up in a pony tail and slog on.

An hour later, still shy of the ridge, my clothes drenched with more sweat, we reach a handmade picnic table covered with a thatch roof. With two whacks of his machete, our guide-in-training separates banana leaves from a tree and lays them across the table's boards, creating a green tablecloth. Keo unties leaf-bound food packets that's he brought from the Khmu village and dumps their contents onto the table: sticky rice, spicy minced eggplant, steamed vegetables (carrots, cabbage, morning glory vine), roast chicken, chopped chicken livers, fried pigs' ears and sweet red bananas. We eat family-style with our fingers, as is Lao custom. The liver and ear mounds quickly diminish and Keo offers me the last bite of ears. Peeling another banana, I insist he finish them. Lyda and Ava wholeheartedly agree.



Crossing a creek in northern Laos

With batteries recharged, we hike on, until we reach the ridge with its awesome view. Then down, down, down, crossing streams on slippery logs, until we reach a bamboo stile.

"We're here," our regional guide announces.

We climb over the fence marking the edge of the village's lands, and walk through rice paddies, emerald green with a newly planted crop. The path winds geometrically through the paddy, crisscrossing fields. Walking in cropland isn't any easier than in the jungle, for one wrong step, and I'll face-plant into a water-filled paddy. We pass two men hunting eels in the creek that runs along the field's edge.

Forty minutes later, we spot the village's thatched roofs. Pigs, piglets, chickens, dogs and puppies scatter at our entrance. Drums beat. Women, dressed in traditional homemade tunics, watch us from open doorways. Boys play boules, a remnant of the country's French colonial past, kicking a ball within an earthen court. Children gather around us.

"Sobaidee," a little girl says. She holds up a giant beetle tied on a string and waves us forward for a closer look.

Without hesitation, we three step toward her.

If you go: hiking trips arranged through Treasure Travel Laos. Visit www.treasuretravellaos.com.

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Ban Yod Long, a Lanten ethnic village in northern Laos.