



Cycle Laos 2018

Vientiane to Luang Prabang, 03 - 12 February

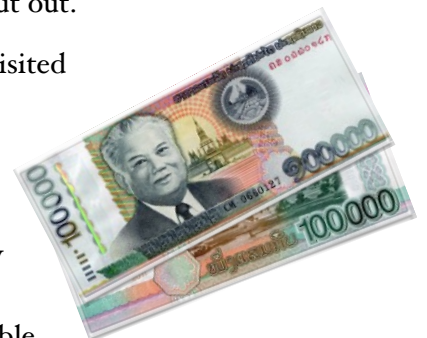
There's a couple of lines from the Tom Waits song 'Tom Traubert's Blues' (later covered by Rod Stewart) that are on continuous loop in my head: *"No one speaks English, everything's broken and my strength is leaving me now..."*

I'm in Laos, a country of eight million people sandwiched between Vietnam and Thailand that has the unfortunate distinction of being the most bombed country on earth per capita. During the Vietnam War from 1964 until 1973, more bombs were dropped on this country than on Europe during World War II.

The reason I'm peddling up this 5% incline and have been for the last two and a half hours is - along with eighteen other brave souls - to raise funds for the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), a UK charity dedicated to clearing landmines and unexploded ordnance. Given that an estimated 30% of the bombs that rained down on Laos failed to detonate, they have their work cut out.

Three days earlier before setting out on this 250 mile, five day journey, we visited the MAG Laos programme in the capital, Vientiane, to learn about what mine clearance work involves.

The scale of the bombing in Laos was immense, the country suffering the equivalent of one raid every nine minutes, 24 hours a day for ten years. Very few areas were untouched which has left a grim legacy as much of the farmland is still contaminated with unexploded bombs and therefore unusable.



Clearance is a pain-staking, labour-intensive operation involving small teams of highly disciplined individuals scouring each square inch of ground to a depth of 40 centimetres. The work is so intense that each team member (In Laos, MAG employs only locals) must take a 10 minute break every hour and may only work for seven hours a day in total.

The method works: MAG has made 58 million square metres of land safe, returning it back to communities where it can be farmed again. Critically, they have developed the technique so well that



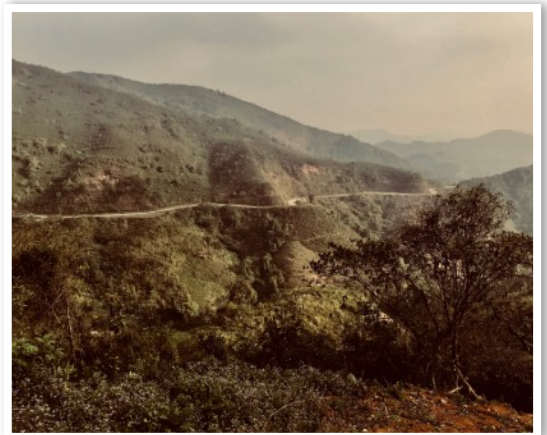
the Laos teams have suffered no injuries, despite the risks they face. However, this all requires funding, with each 13 person team costing between US\$4,500 to US\$5,000 per month to run, which is why we are here trying to raise £100,000.

Aside from mine clearance, MAG has forged relationships with other charities operating in Laos and have arranged for us to visit a school. It's really impressive. Disciplined, orderly classrooms and a peak at one of the blackboards suggests the children must get to grips with basic algebra, long division and percentages about two or three years

earlier than in the UK. The human potential is clearly immense but the schools lack resources. To help in some small way we have bought with us a lot of basic classroom things (pencils, crayons, rulers) to leave with them.

After an 80km first day, culminating in a testing forty minutes climb to get to our hotel overlooking the Nam Nghum reservoir, we ask our guide Steve, a policeman from South Wales who does these tours in his holidays, what joys the ride tomorrow holds. After some thought and in mellifluous, valley tones, he declares it: "Undulating...".

"Mmm. Undulating, eh?" Along with "vibrant", an adjective favoured by estate agents to describe residential neighbourhoods light-years away from the first signs of gentrification, "Undulating" covers a broad spectrum. In the context of the Route 13 North as we cross a river at Hin Hoeup and plough on through Vang Khai towards Tha Heua, it turns out to be at the very end of that spectrum.



"Bloody hell, it looks like Skull Island..." declares one of our number as we scale a particularly severe undulation and plunge into a verdant valley the other side. Odd rock formations loom either side of the road draped in lush greenery. Near Xang, we stop to visit one the many impressive Buddhist Temples, their scale and opulence in stark contrast with the poverty of the surrounding village.



Later, in the red dust, diesel and hustle of the town of Khan Man as the sun sets, the shrill sound of a siren punctures the thrum. A few minutes later comes the unmistakable low crump of exploding ordnance. We have



just heard one of the bomb disposal teams detonating a landmine; a reminder of why we are here and the danger that is all around.

Tuesday has the 'option' of a further 1000m climb over 15km to the Phoun Khoun viewpoint and then a gentle descent to the small village by the Nam Ming River where we are staying. This 'option' is in addition to the 1200m already scaled but a heady brew of testosterone and pig-headed refusal to give in takes hold and so we press on. And that was only the women...

I would love to describe the view from the top but darkness comes early at this time of year in these parts. At 18:15 when we get there, the light has vanished along with the heat of the day. We roll down the hill, badly need of hot showers and hot food. It was only when the lights dimmed as I turned on the shower and some of the wiring in the bathroom started to arc did I abandon the plan and go next door to the restaurant. I find my colleagues huddled round a fire they had made on the stone floor but the local clear whisky made from poppies and mixed with full-fat Coca-Cola soon livens everyone up. It's possibly the most uncomfortable night away from home I've ever spent but also one of the most memorable, for all the right reasons.

Shivering in the dawn of another 07:00 start, a few intrepid souls hare off down the hill banking the bikes over round a series of descending hairpin bends. Being a bit (lot...) more of a wuss, I hang back but catch up soon enough...

A combination cold tyres and cold, gravelly road have culminated in a spill. In the UK, the equivalent tumble would be laughed off but here, half-way up a mountain and a long way from a hospital, it has a more sobering effect. But as the planning and organisation of this tour is meticulous, we have Sainly Tour Doctor Emma on hand to patch him up and on we go, albeit a little more cautiously...



After the altitude of the previous four days, a gentle downhill descent into the city and then a 58km round trip to Kuang Xi, a spectacular three-tier waterfall and bear sanctuary completes the tour. Over five days, we have covered 386km and scaled 8,440 metres, burning 15,910 calories in the process although in my case, it would be difficult to tell. Celebratory beers next to the Mekong River as the

suns sets are a fitting end to a trip that has surprised and delighted on every level.



UNESCO protected since 1955, Luang Prebang is a faded, French Colonial gem of a town sitting, like a two-storey Manhattan, at the junction of the Nam Khan and Mekong Rivers. Increasingly popular for 'Gap Year' or 'Career Sabbatical' types wearing wide, patterned trousers they would not dream of sporting at home, it's about as cosmopolitan as Laos gets but manages to have become so without losing it's slightly shabby charm. It has

supremely chilled bars. 'Utopia' is so relaxing, it is literally horizontal as the punters laze around on a series of day beds, stroking and hugging one another like mildly-sedated zoo animals. It has good



restaurants with 'Tamarind' in particular getting the thumbs up from all of us who went. With a friendly market and *laissez faire* vibe - a legacy of the French heritage maybe - it's the perfect place to let aching bodies rejuvenate before the long journey home.

Thank you so much to everyone who has supported me in this endeavour. The rationale for the conflict that makes fund-raising efforts like this so urgent remains hotly debated but despite ending over forty years ago, it continues to ruin the lives of Laotians.

To put it in perspective, a WWII bomb explosion with casualties in the UK in 1990 would have been front page news, whereas in Laos in 2018 - the same interval - casualties occur often.

While the nuances of the debate over this 'Secret War' are beyond my comprehension, the innocence of people it affects is not. As a result of your donations to my personal appeal, land in Laos and in MAG programmes around the world will be made safe and returned to productive use, enabling people to rebuild their lives and their countries.

David Tymm
22 February 2018



Please visit <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/David-Tymm> to see how far David has got towards his fundraising target of £5,000 or to make a donation.

We also have an SMS shortcode option where you can donate in increments of £5 and £10 using your mobile phone. To use this service (UK mobiles only), please text MOVO63£5 or MOVO63£10 to 70070.

Both online and mobile services will be available until 30 April 2018

Thank you.

*This article represents the views and opinions of the author and do not represent those of Mines Advisory Group