

AN ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS IN LUANG NAMTHA, LAO PDR

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Introduction

Laos is currently experiencing a rapid expansion in the tourism industry, with the number of visitor arrivals increasing from 37,613 in 1991 to 500,200 in 1998 (National Tourism Authority, 1999). These figures include regional tourists from Vietnam, Thailand and China who are able to obtain border passes in addition to individuals seeking Thai visa extensions. Exclusive of regional tourists and visa extensions, the number of international tourists entering Laos in 1998 was 120,903. The United States (20,174), France (17,886) and Japan (12,936) presently represent the largest number of visitors.

Data obtained from the Lao National Tourism Authority (NTA) indicates that international tourists primarily visit Laos because of the country's natural and cultural assets. In addition 28% of international tourists report that they chose to visit Laos because it remained a relatively "new destination". The NTA reports the average international tourist stays for 5 days and spends 90 US\$ per-day. It is important to note that these data were compiled from a survey of international tourists about to depart the country via Watty International Airport, and may fail to accurately reflect the interests, attitudes and average length of stay of the majority of tourists visiting Laos, especially the visibly numerous independent travelers or "backpackers" not utilizing the services of Watty Airport. Because no data currently exists regarding this substantial population, this report represents an effort to gain a better understanding of the demographic composition, interests and attitudes this group.

Research Site

Luang Namtha is located in the extreme northwest of Laos, bordering China and Myanmar. Over 85% of the province's 9,325 km² are mountainous, with 59% of this landmass covered by dense forests (Luang Namtha Office of Information and Culture, 1999). The province is divided into five administrative districts, containing 470 villages, with a total population of 114,741 (1995 Census, Statistics Office, Luang Namtha). There are over 30 ethnic groups residing in Luang Namtha making it the most diverse province in the country. Overall, the provincial population distribution relative to the broad ethnic classifications of *lao loun* (lowlanders) *lao teung* (uplanders) and *lao soung* (highlanders) is relatively balanced at 33%, 29% and 38%, respectively.

The reliability of road and air transportation to the province has improved substantially over the past decade. The 200-km road to Houei Xai links Luang Namtha with northern Thailand, and there is an all weather road to the international border checkpoint at Boten linking the province with southern China. From the southeast, Luang Namtha is accessible from Luang Prabang via Udomxai province. Lao Aviation operates non-stop round trip flights from Vientiane four times weekly, and there is twice-weekly service from Luang Prabang and Houei Xai. It is also possible

to reach Luang Namtha via the Mekong and Namtha Rivers, however this mode of travel is disproportionately expensive, therefore most tourists travel overland by truck or bus.

The number of tourists visiting Luang Namtha has increased from 4,732 in 1995 to 18,600 in 1998 (Luang Namtha Tourism Office, 1998). To accommodate the growing number of visitors many low-cost guesthouses and hotels have been constructed. Presently there are 19 in Namtha district, 12 in Muang Sing, 2 in Vieng Phoukha and 4 in Muong Long. The cost of overnight accommodations ranges from 5,000 - 50,000 kip. These establishments often have attached restaurants serving Lao and some basic western food. Electricity is available from 6-10 pm in Luang Namtha City, 6-9 pm in Muang Sing Town and dependant on privately owned generators in Vieng Phoukha and Muong Long.

Methods

Data were obtained from a convenience sample of departing international tourists at the main bus terminal in Luang Namtha City. Subjects were asked to self-administer a survey and record their opinion regarding tourism's positive and negative effects on the Luang Namtha-Muang Sing area, as well as provide suggestions as to how they felt tourism could be improved. All data were obtained using the English language. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS for windows version 7.5. General information on the study participants is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Age, sex and nationality of international tourists in Luang Namtha Province(n =131)

Age: 27 (mean) 19 - 55 (range)

Sex: male 55%

Country of origin:

Austria	2.3 *
Australia	6.1
Belgium	2.3
Canada	9.2
Denmark	2.3
England/UK	13.0
France	5.3
Germany	3.8
Israel	12.3
Italy	2.3
Japan	11.5
Netherlands	10.7
Norway	3.8
New Zealand	.8
Poland	1.5
Switzerland	3.8
Sweden	2.3
Thailand	.8
USA	4.6
Other	1.5

* Percent

Results

The majority of tourists (97%) reported that they traveled overland to reach Luang Namtha, with the most popular entry point being Houi Xai (43%) followed by Vientiane (38%). Houi Xai and Vientiane are also the most popular exit points (43% and 31%, respectively), with Boten a distant third (13%). The mean number of days this population planned to spend in Laos was 23 (SD = 8.65) ranging from 2 - 60 days, with the average length of stay in the Luang Namtha-Muang Sing area being 4 days (SD = 2.1). Mean daily expenditure was 9 US\$, indicating this group will spend an average of 207 US\$ per person during their stay in country. As previously mentioned, Luang Namtha possesses a pristine natural environment and diverse population of ethnic minorities. As shown in table 2, these two assets were major factors influencing tourists to visit the province.

Table 2. Tourist's Main reasons for visiting Luang Namtha

Nature	66 *
Monuments & Museums	6.1
New destination	43.5
Ethnic minorities	67.9
Culture	50.4
Food	11.5
Handicrafts	15.3
Other	13.0

* Percent

Visits to Minority Villages

A substantial percentage of tourists are visiting minority villages in Muang Sing, with 55% of our population reporting they had been to a minority village. The most frequently visited ethnic groups are the Akha and Yao. An earlier assessment in Muang Sing revealed that 70% of tourists visiting minority villages were using bicycles to transport themselves to the villages, (Nam Ha Ecotourism Project, February 2000) however a current ban on bicycle rentals in Muang Sing is denying tourists this mode of transportation and to an extent, the freedom to venture very far from Muang Sing Town independently.

Currently only a small percentage of tourists are spending the night in minority villages, but the *number* of tourists is set to increase with the proliferation of guides offering overnight trekking opportunities in Muang Sing. The appearance of guides and trekking opportunities is much less visible in Luang Namtha. After personal communication with the three know guides operating in Luang Namtha, the authors estimate that less than 20 tourists went on overnight trips to minority villages during the period of December 1999 - May 2000.

Handicrafts

Table 2 shows 15.3% of tourists expressed an interest in the region's handicrafts. The most popular items are textiles, jewelry and clothing. In Muang Sing, Tai Dam women produce and sell textiles and clothing (of which the quality and price is steadily decreasing). Hmong women mainly sell embroidery, small handbags and some clothing, and Akha women sell reproductions of traditional silver jewelry (made from recycled soft-drink cans) beaded necklaces and bracelets, Akha headdress and some clothing. The main outlet for handicrafts in Luang Namtha is Had Yao Handicrafts Cooperative, located 2 km north of Luang Namtha City.

Trekking and River Trips to the Nam Ha NBCA

The Nam Ha NBCA is a 222,400 hectare protected area containing diverse flora and fauna, in addition to a number of minority villages within its boundaries. Because of the high level of interest tourists express in Laos' cultural and natural heritage, the Lao authorities actively promote ecological and cultural tourism. If properly managed, ecotourism can be a viable stimulus for natural resource conservation and rural development but the broad scope of that discussion is not this study's intention. We did assess tourists interests in overnight trekking trips to the NBCA with a trained local guide, however, and found 74% were interested in such an activity. When asked about guided river trips to the NBCA 82% expressed interest, confirming a significant market exists for ecotourism activities in Luang Namtha. Surprisingly, although there was a high level of interest in visiting the Nam Ha NBCA, only 35% of our sample had ever heard of the protected area.

Tourism's Effects on Luang Namtha-Muang Sing

Although tourists themselves, 21% of our sample felt tourism was having a negative effect on the area. The percentage of tourists who thought tourism was having positive or mixed effects was 55% and 24%, respectively. The economic benefits of tourism were the main reason people felt it was having positive effects, however many thought the influx of money was "changing peoples traditional way of life" and viewed tourism revenues as negative. In addition, respondents felt that tourism was causing adverse cultural effects such as villagers loss of cultural identity, begging, the "human zoo effect", and commercialization of culture. Conversely, a small number of tourists perceived villagers' contact with tourists as an opportunity for locals to engage in cultural exchange with foreigners on a level not previously attainable. Further to this concept, two tourists wrote that the sudden interest in traditional cultures would help stimulate their preservation. A small percentage of our sample wrote that the growing number of tourists and tourism revenues could stimulate infrastructure improvements. The most alarming negative effect reported was the proliferation of "drug tourism" and availability of opium.

Suggestions for Improving Tourism in Luang Namtha-Muang Sing

Our survey's final question asked, "what can be done to improve tourism in the Luang Namtha-Muang Sing area?" Since there were only slight variations on recurring subjects, we have categorized and listed below tourist's suggestions in order of most to least frequently cited:

- improve transportation and infrastructure
- more and better information
- better accommodations
- remove trash
- preserve Lao culture
- don't do anything
- more English spoken by tourism providers
- permit village visits only with licensed guides
- allow bicycle rentals in Muang Sing
- involve villagers
- educate hilltribes about tourist's expectations
- control prices, more reasonably priced guides
- direct tourism tax revenue to health and education
- construct a handicraft market
- do not improve transportation

The majority of suggestions were directed towards improving logistic and physical comforts for the visitor, however, socially conscious tourists do exist, and expressed a desire to mitigate perceived and actual threats to the socio-cultural and natural assets of the region. A Danish woman writes:

"We - the foreigners - have to learn the language, culture, people, country and more about everything here in Laos so we can understand, accept, help and not spoil your people and country by our visits. I hope you won't make the hilltribes to be your moneymakers. Try to teach them a bit about us and our culture. Don't make them think and expect that tourists are just money for them. This will not be good for either them or us."

Discussion

This study was conducted in order to examine the demographic composition, attitudes and interests of international tourists visiting the Muang Sing-Luang Namtha area. As far as we know, this is the first time a study of this nature has been conducted in Luang Namtha Province. Possibilities for bias exist in that survey data were obtained using the English language, however repetition in regard to suggestions for improving tourism are similar across the wide variation of countries of origin, including countries where English is not commonly spoken. In our sample mean costs per day are only 9 US\$. One can certainly subsist on this amount, however, the authors suspect that subjects estimated their daily costs exclusive of visa fees and possibly some transportation. Therefore, we propose that this group's overall daily expenditure is slightly higher than 9 US\$. A high percentage of the economic benefits of this seemingly small daily expenditure is directly benefiting mostly Lao owned businesses, as this group is lodging and eating in locally owned establishments and purchasing local goods and services. The negative socio-cultural effects derived from the influx of international tourists are an unwanted side effect, as is the previously non-existent drug tourist in Muang Sing.

Conclusion

This study represents a first step in assessing the overall impacts of tourism on the Luang Namtha-Muang Sing area. Presently a substantial number of international tourists are utilizing overland transportation to reach the province, primarily interested in the natural and cultural heritage found in Muang Sing and to a lesser degree, Namtha District. Luang Namtha is mainly accessed via Houi Xai in neighboring Bokeo province, followed by the Vientiane - Luang Prabang - Oudomxai - Luang Namtha route, which is also part of a larger circuit linking Northeast Thailand (Nong Kai), central and northern Laos, and Northern Thailand (Chiang Rai). Data from international tourists indicates that tourism is having both positive and negative effects on Muang Sing and Namtha District, with the most visible negative effects appearing in Muang Sing. If current trends continue, the number of international tourists will continue to increase, putting additional strain on the regions cultural and natural resources. In order to mitigate erosion of the very assets that make this region so attractive, it is recommended that input from stakeholders including National and Local authorities, tourism providers, ethnic minorities and tourists are included in the process of creating a management plan to ensure the protection of Luang Namtha's precious natural and cultural heritage.