

Phou Khao Khouay National Protected Area



Trekking at

Ban Na

A Brief Introduction and Trail Map

Ban Na, the elephant village. This small and peaceful village is located in the Thaphabath District, province of Bolikhamxay, just 82 km south of Vientiane. Easy to access, it is an ideal destination for trekking tours into the wilderness of the nearby Phou Khao Khouay National Protected Area.

Ban Na – the village and its problems

The village has been established 1948 and comprises today of 109 households or nearly 600 inhabitants. Most of the villagers are subsistence farmers (rice, vegetables like eggplants and others). The women go daily into the nearby forest to collect some additional food from there. Men may go for hunting, even into the protected area, or for fishing in the numerous creeks during the rainy season. Almost all women and young girls are engaged in basket production. With astonishing skill and speed are they splitting and weaving the raw bamboo into neat baskets. For a little income, these ubiquitous baskets for sticky rice are finally sold in the region, to Vientiane or even to Thailand. Unfortunately, many of the young generation cannot find jobs in the village and often have to leave their families and go far away to make ends meet.

The people of the village are now suffering from considerable damages to their fields caused by elephants, which came down to the lowlands from the nearby mountains of Phou Khao Khouay few years ago. In the past, the people in and around the park actually never had any problem with the beasts, both trying to avoid each other. The reasons for this new behavior are not well known, but it is most likely that the elephants got attracted by sugarcane, which the villagers started to plant on advice of a sugar company. For these animals (elephants are apparently as sweet-toothed as we humans are) all the delicious sugarcane, pineapple and banana down near the village were just irresistible. Since the elephants regularly raid the farmers' fields and do not attempt to go back to the mountains anymore, they're posing a permanent threat, physically and financially, to the people.

Consequently, the farmers realized this problem and stopped planting sugarcane, for which they originally hoped to earn quite a penny, but the elephants did not play their part and were not in the mood to move back to the uphill forests. Now they knock around in the extensive bamboo belt between the village and the park – just a favorite habitat for elephants too. This causes another problem, because the women, used to collect their daily forest products from there, are now afraid to encounter these huge and potentially dangerous animals. Though not yet considered to be a problem, the elephants, numbering 32 after last sightings in 2003, destroy a large part of the bamboo while bulldozing through the vegetation, thus having a possible future impact on the village handicraft as well. A fabric of elephant trails and destruction to the vegetation is telling the story.

Yes, though sounding unbelievable, there are wild elephants still roaming around in the outskirts of Vientiane! Trekking here and getting a possible glimpse of these wonderful creatures can be a rewarding experience. Ever since, elephants have been an integral part of Phou Khao Khouay's wildlife. Nowadays however, due to human influences (habitat loss, dam construction, old hunting practices), their population has been reduced to only two herds at the north eastern part and close to Ban Na. About 50 km apart, both herds are probably not linked with each other anymore, therefore giving some concern regarding the long-term viability of elephants in the Phou Khao Khouay park. Generally, not much is known about them and thorough studies on these animals are highly desirable.

It is not difficult to understand the sentiments of the farmers towards elephants. A cooperation project between the National Tourism Authority of Laos and the German Development Service (DED) aims to help the villagers to find alternative sources of income, such as developing sensitive nature tourism around the village, which in turn may compensate, at least in part, for the losses triggered by the elephants.

Community Development and Conservation – Or where your money goes...

Killing an elephant is strictly prohibited by national conservation laws and any offences result in hefty fines and prison terms. Understandably, the people have little sympathy for the National Protected Area, from which the elephants come, and its wildlife, when their livelihood is so badly affected.

The *Ban Na Development Project* aims to mitigate some of these problems with full participation of the villagers. If the villagers learn to understand that wildlife is not necessarily a threat to them but can be beneficial asset, they may become "friends of nature". And – first signs of such change of view are already visible.

The benefits, to be realistic, must be reflected in financial gains. A key is seen in a carefully organized and managed tourism, which can create new jobs and income to the village. It must be ensured that this strategy is sustainable and will not collapse after a few months. The village's social structure needs to be maintained and any new dependencies, e.g. after giving up their traditional daily work such as farming in favor of tourism related businesses, have to be avoided. The villagers must be kept immune to the fluctuations of the global tourism market.

In numerous meetings and with extensive training, the villagers of Ban Na have been prepared for the influx of visitors wanting to see their elephants and beautiful village lands. "Falangs" (foreigners) flocking into their village is a new experience. But just to please a foreign visitor is - despite all legendary Lao hospitality - not filling an empty stomach or provides a decent future for the village's youngsters.

With your booking of the trip, you're not paying into the pockets of an entrepreneur from far away. First of all, the enthusiastic guides (who all come directly from Ban Na) get their due share for their responsible job (1\$/day and visitor). A considerable amount (presently 5\$/visitor) is paid into a so-called 'Revolving Fund', a village-owned banking system, from which villagers are entitled to borrow money for own important projects or in case of financial problems. Of course, the money must be paid back within reasonable time, thus (hopefully) money never gets lost. A village committee manages the funds and loans are agreed upon and handed out in public meetings only. The local district authorities and the Phou Khao Khouay National Park management jointly issue 'trekking permits' for each tourist (receiving 1 and 3\$, respectively, per tourist). The generated funds shall be used for conservation activities and tourism infrastructure development. Finally, villagers are encouraged to prepare small food packages for each visitor going into the woods, thus creating a small additional income for them. However, a considerable amount has to be charged for transportation and logistics. After evaluating different alternatives, it was concluded (and the wish of the villagers), to engage a professional company to finally organize the tour groups in Vientiane and bring the participants to the village. By arriving there, the village is taking over complete control.

The whole affair is new for the villagers, thus not everything is near to perfect. Please understand the difficulties the villagers still have to please their visitors, but they are doing their best. With more time and more experience any such problem will disappear quite soon. In the meantime - and hopefully in the future as well - visitors will experience a friendly and authentic Lao village managing its own community-based tourism business. Each tourist visiting Ban Na is directly contributing to the village's development and conservation of wildlife, particularly the elephants!

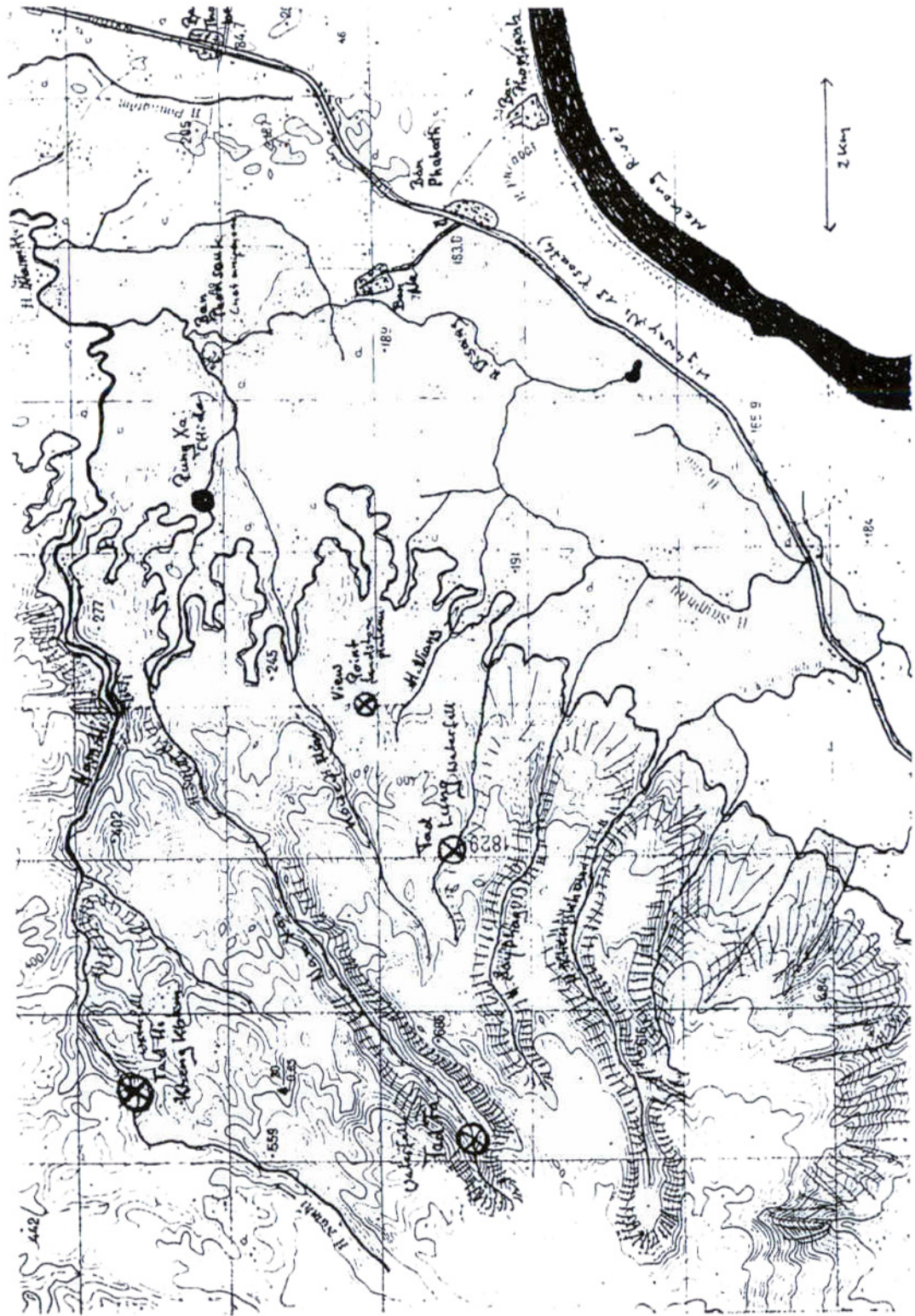
How to get there?

Due to reasons described in the previous chapter, Ban Na can only be visited in groups organized by a licensed tour company, which will be responsible for the trip including transportation, provision of guides, and collection of the fees. Here you will get also your 'trekking permit'. Nevertheless, any other tour operator in Vientiane can be approached to arrange the trip to Ban Na.. The group size is strictly limited to a maximum of six to seven people. At present, only 2 two-day trips per week are available. The village itself is about an hour's drive from the city. Interested people may contact Lao Youth Travel in Vientiane or any other tour operator.

Please note: If you decide to go on your own, you may risk to be turned away by the villagers. The reason is to avoid overcrowding and not to excessively disturb the elephants – which may result in aggressive behavior by the animals and ultimately pose uncontrollable danger to the visitors and the villagers as well.

Some further useful information

The villagers are planning to construct a hide (watchtower) to observe elephants at a saltlick. Unfortunately, due to technical and financial constraints, this ambitious project could be realized until now. But there is nice nature around and on the trekking tours offered you may encounter many signs of elephants (dung, damage to the vegetation, tracks etc.). If you're lucky, you may hear them from not too far away. But it should be avoided, for the



animal's sake and for your own safety, not to follow them.

All participants should bring good spirits with them. Enough drinking water is essential (at least 3-4 liters, depending on the person). You'll definitely lose several liters of water during the trek, even it's a simple one. And this has to be replaced. Though the villagers will provide some basic food for the tour, extraordinarily hungry people should bring along some additional food, if they wish so. For an additional fee, porters can be hired in the village. There's no accommodation in the whole area available. Your accommodation will be the forest, with a hammock or directly on the ground - but don't worry it's not dangerous. We've done it many times. Where are you out for then?

It is an unavoidable fact that the guides do not speak English. Sorry! Language lessons are envisioned, but it's an illusion that they will be able to explain complicated matters even in medium terms. But they are prepared to give you some written information about the most important forest plants used in the village and the wildlife for your briefing - without, of course, carrying too many books around. Take it as an experience and challenge to be in a new country and deal with the locals - not being spoiled by the city yet. If you nevertheless prefer to have an English speaking guide 'on board', please ask your tour operator.

A walk through the village prior to the trek will give you first hand opportunity to observe the whole process of basket weaving, from cutting the raw material to the finished product ready for sale.

Destinations for trekking at Ban Na

Longer treks to quite distant places are rewarding, such *Tad Lung* waterfall, or the more distant *Tad Fa*, a 40 meter high cliff. This mighty waterfall is unfortunately only seasonal. On the way to *Tad Lung*, the *Dan Khoan* plateau reveals wonderful views over the Mekong into neighboring Thailand. The *Nam Hi* river with its beautiful forest and many birds invites for a trek and sleep in nature at its finest.

You may also pay a visit to the nearby Phabath temple (passing on the way) with its well-known Buddha foot print, and the very nice Wat Phonsanh (2 km from Phabath) on a small hill, overlooking the majestic Mekong.

Some useful advises for visitors at Ban Na for a rewarding and unspoiled trip

- Awareness and responsibility are the first things to take into Ban Na and its environs.
 - Be yourself an example for others. Respect other people and culture. Don't wear revealing clothes.
 - Avoid everything encouraging children to beg for sweets and particularly money.
 - Stop pollution: carry out what you carry in. Remember, litter can kill wildlife.
 - Please do not collect, damage or kill animals, trees, flowers, or rocks, respectively.
 - Prevent, by any means (watch your cigarette butt), forest fires. Make sure, all fires are completely extinguished before you depart.
 - Don't encourage guides to chase elephants on your trek just to get the thrill of getting close to them. It is potentially dangerous and by no means good for the animals.
 - Don't buy any wildlife (for food as well as souvenir).
 - Never trek alone. All treks starting at Ban Na are guided tours only.
 - Please follow the instructions of your guides, since they are responsible for your safety.
 - Don't underestimate physical strain you may encounter during trekking in difficult terrain.
 - Plan your trip. Bring enough drinking water with you! Wearing a hat is strongly recommended. Always wear strong shoes, preferably boots.
 - Don't climb steep cliffs. Rocks may be loose or slippery, particularly during the wet season and in moist places.
 - Never step backwards blindly while taking pictures.
 - Watch out for thorny plants and sharp edges of (cut) bamboo (often on eye level...)
- The park authorities as well as the villagers (guides) cannot take any responsibility for injuries or damages to your equipment. To minimize any risk, please follow strictly the instructions of your guides and abide by the rules and regulations set by the authorities concerned.

We wish you a pleasant visit to Ban Na and a rewarding trip into the forests of Phou Khao Khouay!

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