LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

As Hordes of Tourists Come, Heritage Goes

by BUI NGUYEN CAM LY

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By 5:30 a.m., the Buddhist monks, clad in saffron robes, were already walking down Sisavangvong main street, which leads toward the ancient quarter of this country's ancient capital, a World Heritage site.

In the gloomy light of dawn, they looked like a strip of moving orange silk. Some white-haired, old men of the town, kneeling down and bowing to show respect, distributed glutinous rice to the monks as they went through their morning ritual of collecting alms from the community.

But this harmonious moment was broken after a young girl came to invite tourists to buy some glutinous rice wrapped in a banana leaf and to offer to the monks—commercialising a Buddhist ritual.

Luang Prabang, capital of an ancient kingdom that more than 600 years ago covered present-day Laos, southern China and north-eastern Thailand, is one of several stops along a heritage route for tourists in the Greater Mekong Subregion that includes Cambodia's Angkor Wat and Vietnam's Hue.

Officials say the number of tourists has been rising steadily since 1995, after the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) put Luang Prabang in its World Heritage list and efforts went underway to preserve its 33 temples and more than 700 traditional houses.

Some travel agencies say that the town receives more than 500 tourists a day, making it a key contributor to the tourism dollars that Laos earns.

The present tranquility is "too fragile, one wonders for how long it can stand the flow of tourism," comments Inthavong, owner of Villa Santi, the top hotel in town.

Already, changes—and not just physical—are underway. Peny, a 21-year-old monk in Mai temple, says he is learning English everyday in the monastery as well as night class in town, where the instructors are foreigners.

He plans to drop his saffron garb when he finishes his studies. "My parents would like to be a doctor or a teacher, but I only want to be a tourist guide," he says.

"Once a place is opened up to mass tourism, it enters a business cycle. This means that it is gone, the place," Chayant Polpoke, a Bangkok-based critic of mass tourism says, adding that countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion tend to want to follow Thailand's example.

"Places like Luang Prabang can be destroyed depending on the scale of tourism," says Chayant, who works with the Tourism Investigative and Monitoring Team. "If they follow the Thai model of opening up easy access to the place and the government actively promoting it as a tourist destination, then the consequences will be severe, like it has been for Thailand."

For all the concern about the impact on the environment and culture of mass tourism, Thailand remains the envy of South-east Asian countries—after all, it gets 10 million tourists a year and more than 7 billion U.S. dollars in revenues.

Signs of change, some of them worrisome to locals, are also occurring in other World Heritage sites in the region.

In Siem Reap in north-western Cambodia, a local guide, Phalla, talked about the wealthy clients who have come to Angkor Wat — the 12th century temple complex dedicated by an ancient Khmer king to the Hindu god Vishnu and a sign of Khmer civilisation. He said he had sat alongside millionaires who went on helicopters to see the complex from the air.

In 2003, Cambodia aims to get a million tourists, more than half of whom are expected to visit Angkor, capital of the ancient Khmer empire.

Angkor, which was put on the World Heritage list in 1992, is also home to people who, after the fall of the remnants of the Khmer Rouge, returned to their homes inside the Angkor site—but now find themselves caught in a tourist city whose costs are difficult for them to cope with. Dollars are spent here.

The residents mainly depend on the souvenir business in and around the temples. Old people in Phresh Dak village make 20 to 30 dollars a month, just enough to live on as tourism pushes up living costs everyday. They say most children do not go to school since it is too far away -- and they need to sell postcards to support their families.

Some go to the free school put up by Carla, an Italian volunteer. "I teach them English not because they need it for the purpose of selling postcards. I just hope they have a brighter future," she explains.

Going east and down to central Vietnam, there is no sign of the ancient character of Hue—the capital of unified Vietnam in 1802 and the political, cultural and religious centre under the Nguyen dynasty until 1945, in the new area of town that tourists first see.

In 2002, the Vietnamese government said it would develop Hue as one of the country's five tourist cities.

Phon Thuan An, a well-known scholar in Hue, recalls that UNESCO expert Pierre Richard concluded in 1978 that Hue was "pretty well-preserved in comparison to other cities in the region". Hue's World Heritage status came in 1993.

Today, however, foreign tourists usually come for a few days, just enough to see the Inner City, to take a boat trip along the Huong river and visit royal tombs, or listen to traditional music.

This way, hardly do they see the long alleys leading to Hue-style traditional garden houses in Kim Long, Vi Da, or the Chinese-style houses in Gia Hoi area. To tourists, Hue's charm is shaped by the image of concrete historical sites and a few traditional items, no longer genuine. They hardly see Hue's real soul.

Perhaps Hue is lucky this way. Thao, daughter of a family who lives in the royal house Ngoc Son, one of 1,778 garden houses in Hue, says that on some days, a few dozen tourists come to take a look — but not many know how to respect the local life.

"Sometimes when we're taking a nap, tourist guides just come to knock at the door and phone in to ask us to let the tourists in," Thao says. "They come without even taking off their hats and their shoes."