

# Laos' Fair Fare

Laos opened its doors to tourists in the late 1980s, and within years trekkers began searching for the next off-the-beaten-track experience. They started heading into the mountains in northwest Luang Namtha Province with untrained guides, who led them to unsuspecting ethnic villages in remote locations. The results were often disastrous. Visitors stumbled over cultural taboos and villagers were ill-prepared to greet them.



The government quickly realised this was the wrong path for the country's tourism. They approached UNESCO hoping to develop a pro-poor, community-based tourism (CBT) model that would benefit the villagers.

With funding from New Zealand, a group of development practitioners embarked on a mission in Luang Namtha's Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA) to devise a solution. The "Nam Ha Ecotourism Project" kicked off in 1999, and its success earned the United Nations Development Award for Poverty Alleviation in 2001.

The model uses a practical approach that guarantees locals directly benefit. In fact, they run the show, entering into cooperative agreements to act as caretakers of the trails and attractions. Trained provincial guides lead trekkers to ethnic villages, which provide food and lodging, and present their lifestyles and traditions. Local guides delve deeper into the forest and explain its natural products.

So where does the tour fee go? For starters, more than 70% lands straight into the villagers' and guides' pockets, as trekkers move along the trail. Some 7% goes into village funds, which have been set up for education and health. Taxes and trekking permits take up another 6%, and the Provincial Tourism Department receives 5% for organising the tours. And the tour agents? They net some 3-4%, while any profit goes to marketing and maintaining the trails.

Today, Luang Namtha offers more than 20 treks with overnight village stays that follow the Nam Ha model, and the province is not alone. With more than 20 NPAs covering some 15% of Laos, and most of the rest carpeted by forest, some 12 of the country's 18 provinces offer multi-day CBT adventures. They can include longboat rides, elephant treks, mountain biking, and rafting, and more provinces are coming online.



The Nam Ha models has also been adapted to meet another side of fair trade travel in Laos...the mainstreaming of sustainable, responsible tourism practices as stated in the Vientiane Declaration at the 2009 World Ecotourism Conference.

In other words, Laos is creating a balance in fair trade travel by attracting more than just young trekkers and hardcore adventure travellers. Shouldn't flash-packers and baby boomers also have a crack at pro-poor, CBT by simply stepping out of a car or van?

Take "The Tea Caravan Trail" being developed by the Lao National Tourism Administration and the Asian Development Bank's Sustainable Tourism Development Project. The Tea Caravan Trail – Lao Route 3 –follows an ancient trade route that winds from Bokeo Province's Mekong riverside border checkpoint with Chiang Rai, Thailand, to the Route 13 turnoff at Luang Namtha Town to Yunnan, China. And all 10 highlights along the route aim to benefit the locals.

At the southern end stands Houei Xai Town's 100-year-old French colonial garrison, Fort Carnot. The northernmost highlight, Nam Dee Waterfalls in Luang Namtha Town's outskirts, is a five-minute walk from a Lanten village, where visitors can shop for handicrafts.

In between, ethnic villages produce and sell woven goods, rattan basketry, and bamboo paper. The list also includes Bor Kung Nature Park's springs and trails, 700-year-old Vat Mahaphot temple ruins, and Nam Eng Cave – one of Laos' longest mapped underground mazes.

Today, plenty of the nation's natural, cultural, and historical attractions and activities can be reached by road. The Northern Heritage Route takes travellers from Luang Prabang to the Plain of Jars and further west to Viengxay's Hidden Cave City, with ethnic villages, waterfalls, hot springs, and CBT treks along the way.



Konglor Cave, a 7.5-kilometre tunnel navigated by locally operated boats in central Laos' Khammouane

Province, is easily accessed by car or CBT trek, and the village offers overnight stays in a simple lodge.

Further south, The Savannakhet Historic Trail presents five walking–biking–driving, self–guided and/or guided circuits, which take in some 50 locally maintained sites, and the province’s eco–guide unit offers eight CBT trekking and cycling programs with overnight home stays.

Wherever one travels in Laos, fare trade flourishes. It is almost impossible to avoid, and it all reverts back to the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project’s pioneers.

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