

# VIENTIANE TIMES

## **New tourism opportunities for Laos-attracting international travelers in search of genuine culture**

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Tourism is major global business and an important source of revenue to many countries. Are all tourists sun and fun seekers? It may seem so when you watch them at the beaches and bars of Thailand, Spain or Florida. Modern tourism, however, offers chances also to nations without beaches but gifted with other natural and cultural assets.

Laos cannot opt for traditional mass tourism. It must attract other tourists looking for something different, other than the sun and sea. How could Lao seize these opportunities? Mass tourism follows the pattern of mature markets. It splits into segments; the sports segments, skiing in Switzerland, scuba diving in Thailand, Big City traveling to London and Paris and, why not, the eco and ethno tourists coming to Laos! Modern tourism is very much about experience and feelings.

An increasing amount of people wants to meet other people, encounter new cultures, and learn about different life styles. Eco-tourists are in search of animals, African safaris, or scenery, the Himalayas, and ethno-tourists are looking for people and culture such as you could find in Laos.

Some European tour operators already offer the curious traveler a chance to meet and get to know people from other cultures. They arrange trips to India, Mongolia, the South Pacific, Latin America and more. Tourists are offered a chance to actually live and share the daily lives of local people.

This is the experience "mass tourists" never even get close to! Laos has an untapped potential for this kind of tourism. As is often the case, backpackers are the first to arrive to new places. Backpackers are often frowned upon for their looks and modest spending but many of them are well educated. They travel for fun and experience. They are more curious than the traditional tourists.

When they go back and take up a job, they will tell other people about their adventures and encounters. One day they may return to the places they once visited as established and well-paid professionals! The popular Lonely Planet and Rough Guides are the backer packer bibles. Backpackers may act as valuable channels of promotion. Some of them are the avant-gardes of tourism. There is always something to learn about traveling and tourist promotion from backpackers.

The ethno tourists are not looking for big hotels and cities. They look for local people, their traditions and lives. They are well educated. They browse the Internet to find the new destinations. They ask friends. The virtual grapevine on the Internet is more important than the traditional tourist brochure of sun and fun. Traditional tourist promotion should thus give way to more innovative uses of the Internet and the power of the informal grapevine.

Laos can give the visitor a feeling for what it is like to live in a completely different cultural setting, a first-hand impression by — living in — instead of — looking at —. Offer the traveler a stay with a rice farmer or hill tribe family, participating in their daily chores. It may not sound exciting to the Lao reader, but what a difference from the mass tourist—s days by the beach! Support local tourist business to pursue these new trends! Make these trends benefit the local Lao! Get villagers involved in small-scale tourism! Promoting Laos as the next ethnic tourist destination would require a national using the Internet as an important tool. "Producing" the ethnic services for the new tourists is, however, local business, done on a small-scale basis thus suiting people in the villages. This is a way to spread the income from tourists to a broader base of the population, since, these travelers actually want out of the big cities. They want to spend their time and money elsewhere.

Exploiting tourism opportunities while at the same time avoiding undesirable effects on people and local culture and nature is a balancing act! Ethno tourists however distinguish themselves from the

mass tourist in that they normally show more respect for and keen interest in their hosts and their customs.

Laos may distinguish itself from the image of a country like Thailand, enjoying a very strong image abroad, an image of sun and fun, beaches and beauties though. The Lao image might thrive on its genuine as yet unaffected people and nature. Why leave the new tourists to other countries?

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