

World Journey from Imabari: 3rd Country, Laos

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After Myanmar I went to Laos. Although its official name is Lao People's Democratic Republic, it is usually called Laos. It is the only landlocked country among the ASEAN nations and is located on the Indochinese Peninsula in Southeast Asia. It adjoins China in the north, Vietnam in the east, as well as Thailand and Cambodia in the south. The capital is Vientiane and it is sometimes called “The Quietest Capital in the World.”

I took a night bus from Bangkok and arrived there in the morning. I was thinking of having breakfast when I stepped out of the bus terminal and found several stands in front of the building. Most of them carried the same kinds of sandwiches for the same prices. I decided to buy one at the shop with the nicest staff. The sandwich was made of French bread about 20cm in diameter and had a lot of ingredients. Laos used to be a French colony and the bread was really tasty and was only 75 yen despite the big size. The coffee was very good, too. After finishing breakfast, I checked in at a hotel and went out sightseeing. I rented a bicycle and rode it around the city. Vientiane was actually as peaceful and quiet as its nickname implies. There are many temples that look like the ones in Thailand, maybe because Laos and Thailand are next to each other. In the center of the city, there is a building called “Patuxay”, a monument for fallen soldiers that looks similar to the Arch of Triumph in Paris.

Next, I went to the Mekong River, which is the border between Thailand and Laos. When I looked at Thailand on the other side of the river, I thought about the differences in the economic situations between the two countries. Now that the Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge spans the river there are many cars and trains running back and forth, and the Thai currency and language are used in Vientiane as well. When it gets dark, night stalls appear along the river and many families and couples gather there. It seems to be a popular dating spot for locals.

I bought a “Beerlao” at a nearby supermarket. Beerlao has a 99% share of the beer market in the country and it is very popular among the people of Laos and tourists. Many tourists even say that it is the best beer in Southeast Asia. (I myself don’t think so but it is still very good.) The larger size of the bottled beer costs only 100 yen. It is quite reasonable. While I watched the beautiful sunset above the river, drinking the tasty beer, I felt really rich.

The next day I was to go back to Thailand. Since I took a night bus on the way to Laos I decided to take a sleeper train on the way back across the border. Since Japan is an island country where people always take a plane or a boat to go to a foreign country I have always been curious about crossing a border by train or bus. First, I got a departure stamp on my passport at the station and crossed the Friendship Bridge by train. I was surprised to learn that when a train runs on the bridge, automobiles have to stop. That system is different from the Seto-Ohashi-bridge which is two stories and the trains run directly below the regular traffic on the bridge. When the train was crossing the river, I was lucky enough to see the sunset again. It was different from the one I looked at by the river the day before but every bit as beautiful. When we arrived at Nong Khai station on the other side of the river, I got an entry stamp in my passport and changed trains to a sleeper. After a while the sleeper started and the staff came and put the seat down to make it into a bed. The bed was so comfortable and the ride so smooth that I decided to take one again the next time I go to Vientiane from Thailand. About six in the morning, it arrived at the final destination, Bangkok. Looking around I realized how big Bangkok was compared to Vientiane and how different the

atmosphere of the two cities were. I enjoyed being in a developed and lively city like Bangkok, but I also liked the peaceful and slowed down tempo of Vientiane.

Laos seems to be developing slowly like Myanmar. In a few years it will be more developed, but I hope the kindness of the local people and the beautiful sunsets will stay the same.

Translated by Nobuko Kamimura (神村 伸子)

