

Vientiane, Laos: with Page and nostalgia

No city stays the same. Even if after a decade buildings remain - a new block of apartments here, a gap where once stood a remembered land-mark - people change. People and oneself. Eyes see with the burden of intervening experience. The focus has altered with age; emphases been placed elsewhere. As when the mental spaces of childhood later reveal themselves as cramped rooms and narrow gardens.

Vientiane was the somnolent centre of a Buddhist monarchy, a city of dusty streets and Chinese shopkeepers where food barrows sold sticky Vietnamese sweets, sandwiches made of French bread, and freshly pressed sugar cane juice. Bicycles moved more slowly than anywhere else on earth, just fast enough not to topple over. In the shady grounds of numerous wats (monasteries) orange robed monks used to lounge idly in the late afternoon light, while in the bar of the Hotel Constellation a motley collection of Chinese pilots flying for the CIA's Air America, French teachers, resident journalists, an occasional diplomat, USAID personnel and any wandering hip who happened through supped apperatifs, exchanged rumours, or settled into an early game of dice. The night clubs and bars of Dong Palane, and the White Rose would open later.

Vientiane today is the capital of a communist state, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, forward post of Marxism-Leninism in Southeast Asia. The streets are just as dusty, but the Chinese merchants have gone. Concrete blocks of shops stand blank and shuttered, their signboards slowly deteriorating in the monsoon climate. The food barrows are few, immobile, waiting for customers who rarely come. The wats are still shady retreats, but there are fewer monks. Each evening they

water their vegetable gardens, and their study of Buddhism is interspersed with the study of Marx and Lenin. USAID and Air America have gone, to be replaced by hotels full of E-Blockers (Eastern Bloc advisers - Russians, Poles, Czechs, East Germans) who lead their own shuttered lives. The Constellation has been renamed the Vieng Vilay - Lao instead of French. It took the authorities almost five years to decide on a name change. Perhaps it was done on Soviet urging at the same time as the name of the former Hotel Imperial was changed. Can't have Russians staying at the Imperial. No one drinks in the bar of the Vieng Vilay any more, except for the Pathet Lao "manager", a youthful ex-guerrilla with no experience of anything but handling a gun. Dong Palane and the White Rose have closed for good: the girls have crossed the river, moved to Bangkok, or taken to other pursuits.

But Vientiane is still recognizably Lao in important, often intangible ways. The rhythm of life is unchanged. There is less traffic, but bicycles still move at the same leisurely pace. Milling crowds gather at even the suggestion of a baun (festival, public or private). The girl soldiers in baggy Pathet Lao uniforms who act as guides in the National Revolutionary Museum paint their finger nails and make-up. Gone is the earlier revolutionary fervour when such demonstrations of decadent Western culture were banned. After five years in power the regime has adopted more lenient policies. Laos may be changing communism as much as communism is changing Laos.

Page had got there before me, rented a bicycle and

pedalled around to all the places we had known in the sixties. To go back to Laos after 15 years was unreal enough: to find Page there was to push the limits of improbability. He arrived at the Vieng Vilay at midnight, stoned, chuckling, cameras swinging, to pour out the doings of a decade since we had last met in Rome, and fill me in on the Lao brand of Marxism. It had taken him just two days to track down no fewer than three opium holes, and to settle for one where a skeletal Chinese, promptly nicknamed Belsen, filled him pipes in return for Thai cigarettes and a collection of currency. The going rate was about fifty kip a pipe, say around two dollars fifty on the black market. Fifteen years back Vientiane had boasted the largest legal opium den in the world - a former theatre, converted to public couches in the stalls and curtained cubicles on stage. Page and I had put together a party of seventeen, a dozen nationalities, one evening. Old habits die hard.

Page was photographing everything. In the morning lines of silent, bare foot, orange clad monks, heads shaven, eyes downcast, filed at dawn along the roads of the city, receiving the offerings of a few of the faithful. Sticky rice only now; vegetables they grew themselves; meat too expensive. In gardens chiselled in terraces up the river bank, comrade citizens watered and weeded their cabbage and lettuce, without a glance across the Mekong to Thailand, a route so many of their compatriots have taken to escape and exile, and a kind of freedom. No-one took any notice of us; no-one accompanied us; no-one tried to stop us photographing whatever we wished.

Only once had Page had problems. That was on an

out-of-town trip (arranged, Page said, by the Ministry of Pointless Affairs) to take in the dam site at the Nam Ngum, a tributary of the Mekong some 70 miles north of Vientiane. On the way back Page wanted a shot of a Pathet Lao soldier toting his AK47. But the guy objected, and threatened to shoot. Maybe he was Vietnamese. The group's official guide, in a fine example of quick thinking, defused the incident by shouting that Page was a Russian. At which the startled trooplet dropped his rifle, sprang to attention and saluted. There they left him, stock still in the middle of the road, rifle at his feet, and drove back to town. Before the magic word would have been "American".

That was the only excitement of the kind. No good coup d'etat like we'd had in the past, when Page got his start in photography. Vientiane, February 1965. Two young officers who had led the previous abortive coup had had a falling out. It was mainly army versus the police, and who should get a cut in what racket. The army at Chinaim's camp began shelling the Police barracks at Phone Keng across the town. Then the air force got in on the act with T28s. In the British embassy the ambassador strode up and down maintaining a fine^{rm} upper lip, advising people to keep calm. The entire embassy staff, their families and British residents were lying on the floor as shells sailed overhead. The Lao gunners weren't that accurate. The odd mortar fell short. The ambassador was in contact with the American embassy less than a mile away - via London and Washington. It took a while to get through.

For a young journalist with the only MGA in Laos it was a ready made occasion. The AP correspondent, who had

arrived a day or two before with typewriter, violin and bow and arrow (archery for relaxation) was on his own. I gave Page my camera with instructions to press the button at everything he saw, and sent him off on his Honda 250 to bribe his way across the Mekong (the frontier was closed), and head for the nearest US base at Udon to get his film, and my story, out to Bangkok. Page made the trip and back twice before communications were restored, and UPI was exclusive for 48 hours.

Nothing like that now. The Vietnamese keep a low profile and their troops are well out of town. The only excitement is to join the ~~Kom~~^V sat (resistance) and go across from Thailand. March for days from village to village, trying to avoid a fight. It's a tough way to get a story. The Chinese are said to be training hilltribe guerrillas in Yunnan for a brand new insurgency. Poor bloody Laos.

One morning we came across a festival at the Chinese Hokan temple overlooking the Mekong. A few elderly Chinese, those who had hung on. But there was still money around - perhaps not as lavish a celebration as before, but well piled plates of roasted meats and garishly coloured rice cakes. A whole roast sucking pig, its crackling golden in the early light. Candles and red paper decorations. Women burned incense to the river, to the local phi (spirit) housed in his own little pavilion nearby. Across the road two Pathet Lao soldiers cut brass rings from shell case. Polished and sold they brought in a little income. No-one bothered with the Chinese.

In the market the old Laos came to life. Old women sat like crows on raised benches behind their enamel bowls of shrimp paste, ground spices and chillies, cracking earthy jokes at the expense of these strange foreigners with their inquisitive lenses. Some ignored us, others giggled or called for a photo of this or that pusao (young girl). Supplies are getting to the markets again, now that some of the petty trade restrictions have been lifted. Peasants bring in green vegetables, chickens, bunches of bananas, freshly caught carp. Prices are high, but there is plenty of food. The fresh meat is buffalo, pork or venison, identified by the heads of two young stags. Piles of white rice noodles sit under umbrellas, and near the spices and herbs stand huge baskets of rough cut tobacco and dried bunches of marihuana. Smoke it or make soup like the Lao. The price is 5 kip a bunch (about 20 American cents) for enough for a dozen good joints. You can't complain about everything under communism.

A market says things about the way a country is that you can pick up nowhere else. Markets are the first place to get the feel of a place. People come up and talk to you, act and react. In the clothes market are beautiful old secondhand cloths, the which form the traditional calf-length dresses Lao women wear. They are sold off after the gold has gone, after the other valuables, to buy food, to live. Life is hard in Vientiane, especially for those who had a good job with the Americans, or who profitted from the artifically high living standards in the Mekong towns maintained by massive American aid.

There are more consumer goods around than a year or two

ago - thanks to the liberalization introduced early in 1980 to permit a resurgence of private trading. Despite closure of the border with Thailand patent medicines, radio batteries, condiments, needles and thread, sticks of incense, cigarettes all find their way across the Mekong, smuggled by boatmen paying off both sides. May be the added bonus of a refugee on the return trip. The only shoes are Ho Chi Minh sandals cut from old tyres. The old fortune teller is still there - even Marxists need to know the stars. And you can buy chains of flowers already strung as gifts for an altar or shrine.

Before the markets had been busier, brimming with more luxuries from countries around the world, French perfumes, American liquor, Australian tinned fruit. Vientiane was then one of the great gold centres of Asia. Gold was bought to be smuggled into India, Vietnam, in false teeth, up anuses. Those were the days before terrorists and metal detectors. Gold and opium, and later heroin, refined in crude stills in the north of Laos, at Ban H^uei Sai. The CIA bought the Meo opium crop, and gave them guns in return to fight the Pathet Lao. And when the Americans left, many of the Meo stayed - until systematically wiped out, or driven to Thailand. Some groups always seem to lose.

Markets are great for photography - colour, movement, expression - but they are not everything. Laos always abounded with stories, which could be followed up. This time Page was into ducks. Seems Page attended a briefing for E-blockers' journo on the triumphs of Laos' failed cooperativization programme (at which the number of ducks in Laos, down to the

last drake, had been trotted out. The U.N. or the IMF or someone had wanted to know how many ducks in Laos. The Lao were stunned. What for? How would they know? You could hardly run a census in villages days of walking from the nearest road. No-one knew how many people there were, let alone ducks. But ~~saying~~ ^{much the} international aid programme depended on it, ~~so~~ the Lao came up with a total count down to the nearest ducks. None of this rounded off to the nearest thousand. - 190,543 ducks - or some such unlikely figure. The E-blockers were properly impressed, and whipped out notebooks to get the figure down. Then Page ruined the whole show. He wanted to know if the figure included fertile eggs. The question was translated. The Lao briefing officer looked non-plussed. E-blockers suspected a capitalist plot. Page got nasty looks. The subject was changed - the number of hectares of irrigated rice paddies. Page was delighted. He went around Vientiane photographing every duck he could poke a lens at, to the baffled amazement of many a good citizen and duck tender.

One evening the Ministry of Information was kind enough to invite all foreign guests who had gathered for the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic to a party in the grounds of the Lane Xang, Vientiane's poshest hotel. And a very good spread they put on. The minor functionaries of the Ministry stuffed as if they hadn't seen food for a week. (After all, you can't buy much for \$10 a month, even in subsidized Party stores.) E-blockers were more careful about what they ate. There was plenty to drink, and one of the town's best bands, which had a great

time playing music for each country represented at the gathering - an opportunity they seized to introduce some good decadent hard rock. The Lao Marxists still know how to throw a good party.

The next morning was the great rally and military parade to mark the fifth anniversary. This was the great highlight of the celebrations, for which troops had been training, and ministries preparing for months. Word was that some had spent 10% of their annual budget constructing lavish floats, sewing new costumes. The resistance had vowed to disrupt the celebrations, perhaps with yet another assassination attempt on the life of Party Secretary General and Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane, the most detested man in the refugee camps at Nongkhai. So security was strict. The foreign press set off by bus at 5 am, after being rounded up about 4.30, in readiness for the dawn parade.

The bus passed through a series of check points to deposit its party in front of the official stand. In the semi-darkness could be seen rows of troops who must have been there since midnight. As the sun rose the parade ground before That Luang was revealed - about 800 metres of carefully rolled sand, a hundred metres wide. The red and blue bars and white circle of the Lao national flag decorated the reviewing stand. Opposite, perched in trees, sat a high platform for security guards. Crowds of workers and peasants in their festival best held red banners proclaiming the slogans of the Lao socialist state, or waved portraits of Lenin and their own leaders, Kaysone and President Souphanouvong.

The press was requested to stay in a neat little group, but Page was having none of that. He limped untidily from one group of rigid troops to the next, shooting down long lines into the dawn light, or up towards the monument to those who died in the revolutionary struggle, drawing flurried officials after him. Eventually the guide from the Ministry of Information gave up trying to shepherd his flock together. Even E-blockers, once shown the benefits of indiscipline, followed suit. Photographers and journalists everywhere.

All were drawn back to the reviewing stand by the arrival of the official party. On the reviewing stand stood the leading members of the Lao Politburo and Central Committee of the Party, small men in dark suits, half hidden behind a waist high barrier, flanked by official guests from the Communist parties of the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and eastern bloc countries. These were the men who had fought for 30 years, against the French, the Americans; who had survived in their deep limestone caves some of the heaviest bombing delivered anywhere on earth. Now they lived behind the high walls of the former U.S. housing compound with, so it was rumoured, their Vietnamese advisers, running the country at last.

Souphanouvong spoke, then Kaysone read a long speech, full of exaggerated achievements and inflated rhetoric. At the mention of China as international reactionaries in collusion with U.S. imperialism to destroy Laos, the Chinese charge d'affaires staged his ritual walk-out from the diplomatic stand. His car was ready to take him home. And at last the parade was underway.

Troops of the Lao People's Liberation Armed Forces marched first, army, air force, and a small contingent from Laos' Mekong River navy. Boyish officer cadets goose stepped unevenly; seasoned troops marched with the mounted bayonets of each line an inch from the neck of the rank in front; mountain troops of the Hmong (Meo) faction which sided with the Pathet Lao carried shoulder high anti-aircraft guns; girl soldiers looking like serious children marched rigid faced. Then came the military hardware: skyblue motor cycles and sidecars pouring exhaust, mortars, howitzers, trucks and scout cars, while overhead flew Soviet built helicopters and MIG 21 jets.

Here if anywhere was the new Laos. Surely in these stern faced and disciplined youths was to be seen the new Lao socialist man that the Party was determined to create as part of its three revolutions. One revolution would socialize the economy; another would introduce new scientific technology; and the third would be cultural and ideological. To build a socialist Laos, new socialist Lao men and women were needed. Perhaps here in the army they were to be found, for they were not in the markets or the monasteries, in the villages which had rejected cooperative agriculture or in the hills with the guerrillas of the resistance. But what was he like, this new Lao socialist man? Did he retain the easy smile, the languid motion, the natural courtesy of the Lao - or did he have the more penetrating, calculating glance, the quicker step, the abrupt manner of the Vietnamese?

It was hard to tell; perhaps too soon to see how such changes were taking place. Impressions were too diverse. Cheers greeted the float from the Department of Culture

featuring classical Lao dancers, and girls in national dress, far more than for forestry production, or civil aviation with its giant mock airliner and the little truck behind with produce from the department's communal farm. Symbols were hard to decipher. The model for the communist war memorial was a Buddhist stupa; the previous regime chose that monument to Western militarism, the Arc de Triomphe.

In the evening everyone gathered at the parade ground once again, in the grounds of the nation's most sacred stupa, the That Luang, for an old style boun. All except the diplomatic corps who were invited, for the first time, to enter the walled compound of the Poliburo. Security measures were strict again, which detracted from the atmosphere, and there was no public dancing. But the sticky rice packed in long tubes and the lacquered roasted chicken and boiled peanuts tasted the same as we had remembered. The E-blockers ate before going - steak and chips at the Lane Xang. Page bought rice and chicken, scrunching contentedly between flash light shots of young monks and soldiers, of old women selling sweets, of girls hand in hand. After the troops of entertainers from Vietnam and the Soviet Union had packed their acts away, the Lao stage kept going late into the night, with a steady succession of classical dances, revolutionary and traditional songs, and playing of the khene (a kind of bamboo mouth organ), while overhead volleys of red and blue and white parachute flares drifted earthwards.

So what can be said about Laos of today? The French influence and the American influence have gone. The Vietnamese influence may not be so transitory. The Pathet Lao were

welcomed in 1973, as soldiers for national independence, men of an almost ascetic purity of will. Since then so many Lao have fled their country. Why? Policies of peace have proved so much more contradictory than the single-minded pursuit of war. Compromise and tolerance were not permitted to interfere with the consolidation of political power. And by the time the hard line was relaxed, so many had gone. Thousands more remained in reeducation camps. But the Lao revolution has not yet run its course. Perhaps the revolutionaries who now run the country will succeed in building a more just society, one with greater opportunities for all. But one couldn't help leaving Laos wondering why it is that revolutionary movements seem so much more admirable during their days of struggle and heroism in opposition to corruption and entrenched privilege than when they form a government. It is not simply that power corrupts, but that decisions are more complex, conditions more compelling.

One left Laos beginning to recognize something of the complexity and the compulsion. Page left with a Lao flag and a khene and a medal meant for officially invited E-blocker guests.