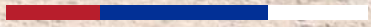




LAOS



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"IS THAT A HARD ROCK CAFE?"

Laos wasn't quite what we imagined.

After an exhausting 12 hours of flying and transit, we finally arrived at Wattay International Airport, Vientiane Capital at 8pm. We were slightly surprised when we stepped out of the plane, at how modern and tidy the airport was. The immigration took a while, and our luggages were already taken off the belts by the time we officially entered the country. Traveling in a group of 6, uneasiness brought by the unknown was barely noticeable.

"It's not THAT hot here." One of us said, as we exited the airport with our heavy luggages that were suppose to sustain us for half a year. The van arranged by the hotel could not take all of us in one ride; I was one of the lucky three who hopped on the ride first; air-conditioning was truly one of the best invention. On the 20-minute drive, Laos continued to surprise us: well-paved roads, hard rock cafe, Daiso, good cars... Everything was beyond our imagination. The city looked like a second-tier city in Mainland China at first glance.

We didn't even have the energy to socialize upon arrival at the hotel. It was a nice place, just that the absent of elevator meant we had to carry everything using the stairs. We all slept extra-well that night.

THE SECOND DAY

The second day was way too productive.

Khamkhoun, the UNV Coordinator for Laos said she would come pick us up in the morning. Vientiane is small. Everything clusters around the city centre right next to the Mekong River. As we patiently waited for the privilege to be picked up by a UN car, Khamkhoun arrived, without a car.

"I'll take you to see apartments first, then we will go to UN House."

"Are we walking?"

"Yes it's very close by, come come."





UN HOUSE LAO PDR

We arrived at the UN House at noon. Having secured apartments located 7-minute walking distance from the UN House, we were relieved, at the same time exhausted from the Laos summer.

The UN House did not look like an office building at all. A green atrium took up most of the ground floor; the tall tree in the middle reached up to the third floor. It's more like a mansion you see when traveling at Thai beaches.

After quickly grabbing lunch at the canteen, we were summoned by our respective supervisors.

"Welcome" The Head of Office of IOM Lao PDR greeted me with a warm smile. She briefly explained some tasks she would like me to take on, and asked me of my expectations. Being a young and motivated baby who was completely unfamiliar with how UN agencies work, I struggled to find an answer to the common question. "I'm happy to do anything" was my reply.

I anxiously walked to the room where the HR lady sat. She was a very friendly and high energy Laotian, who got excited talking about her travel experience in Hong Kong. It was a few years ago, but she still thought of the city fondly.

"Take this, I will take you to get a sim card." She took a black helmet from the top of the shelf and handed it to me. The next thing I knew was how crazy the traffic in Laos was and how PM 2.5 tasted like.



WARMING UP

I was the first UNV and communications person IOM Laos ever had. It was a great honor for me to start everything from scratch; at the same time it was not easy in the beginning, as colleagues were unfamiliar with having me hanging around and often did not know how I could help.

Over July and August, I was given some tasks, like proofreading, photo-taking, and writing social media posts and press release. Time in office passed quite slowly, with light workload and weak wifi that prevented leisure usage.

September was when I finally became more familiar with IOM, our projects and our colleagues. With many interns leaving for further studies after mid-August, we shrank from a 20 people office to 13. My boss was busy working on the handover before her maternity leave, so didn't really have much time to take care of me like a baby. With less human resources at hand, I was assigned more tasks, which I was eager to embrace.

12:00 - 13:10

We had lunch together, the HK squad, almost everyday.

Not everyone could join everytime, but at least 3 or 4 of us would go out for lunch together. UN canteen was cheap and great but we wanted more.

The official lunch hours were 12:00 - 13:00, but we usually took slightly longer lunch breaks, to go exchange money, get money from the bank, or simply because the food was slow. Restaurants did follow the principle of Lao Please Don't Rush. Hong Kong people would call them inefficient, but we slowly grew fond of this laid-back attitude towards everything, spoiled.

I had never had a bad meal in Laos. All the food was delicious and so affordable compared to big cities prices. Not to mention the diversity: from French three-course-dinner to Japanese avocado-salmon rice, less than \$60 HKD, \$85 HKD if you want a sake or a matcha latte.

This was one thing we couldn't get over upon returning to HK, the price and quality of food. And the lack of queues even at the best restaurants.

We also had dinner together, very often.



OVERTIME

My wish came true not long after. I became so busy that I needed to work overtime, almost 3 days a week. From editing lengthy annual reports, writing success stories of participants, to preparing materials for the workshop next day; tasks seemed to find their ways to me in unpredictable manners.

I enjoyed it. To contribute in facilitating safe migration, to work for vulnerable groups, to be trusted with more work. Not to mention how lovely my colleagues were. Sometimes we would order delivery at 16:00 to prepare our stomach for the 2 or 3 incoming working hours.

At first I could see the purple sky stepping out of the UN House. As winter approached, the sun set earlier. I was embraced by the navy blue sky after work. The road home was well-lit and populous, it felt safe even in the dark.



JULY 21, HEAVY RAIN

We had one of the most memorable experience in a blackout.

"OMG it's raining so heavily outside, let's cook quickly!"

"Right, it'd not be fun if it blackout in the middle of the cooking."

4 of us divided labour efficiently, in an attempt to make a simple tomato sauce pasta and stir-fried vegetables with pumpkin.

3 minutes after we put the spaghetti in the bowl, the lights went out, so was all the other electrical appliances, including the stove.

2 of us swore.

1 of us took out a camping light (that's me).

GREAT, now what. Let's hope it gets back soon. Should be less than an hour right...

We ended up sitting on the floor for 3 hours. It was too hot to sit anywhere else. Without wifi and aircon, that was not much to do. I brought my bluetooth speaker, and we searched for songs that had "rain" or "blackout" or "electricity" in their names, then sang along.

The moment electricity came back, we screamed. I immediately went to my room and fetched a sake to celebrate. It was a difficult 3 hours, but we had much fun living the primitive life, and it became a memory we all cherished dearly.

The pasta didn't exactly taste great after soaking in the water for too long. But it was okay.



CHILLAXING

"13:30 downstairs?"

"Okie"

"Sor 5 more min"

"K"

These were usually the first lines of our groupchat in the weekends. All being sleep-lovers who refused to get up before 12nn (with 2 exceptions who woke up at 8am latest), we often had lunch late.

After meeting up in the lobby, we would either walk or take LOCA (the Lao Uber) to our decided restaurants. The moment we got into the LOCA, we started to evaluate and discuss what we like or don't like about the car and the driver, in Cantonese of course. We loved not being understood.

Laos has the best cafes and bars, cozy interior and amazing coffee. We would bring a book to read, or a computer to netflix, to spend the afternoon there. Sometimes we brought nothing, just to chat about work, life, philosophy, studies, careers and everything else. "Intellectual Stimulation" was how one of us called those deep conversations.



NATURE

I travelled 3 times in Laos: Vangvieng, LuangPrabang, and Savannakhet. The first two were with 2 HK freinds, the last one was a work trip.

Laos has beautiful and stunning nature. We saw waterfalls, mountains, green fields... It felt liberating to see the vast amount of unaltered landscape; a needed escape from big city life.

Much money was spent on local handicrafts and textile. And food.



RETROSPECT

I'm eternally grateful for 2018 October me, who read school email and discovered this opportunity. I was anxious about graduation; wanting to further study but with some uncertainty. 2 additional academic years right after the 4 didn't feel quite right for me. Never have I ever imagined to have my first job in UN Laos. My friends don't even know where Laos is.

Like many people, I used to have idealistic expectations of UN; thinking that they are here to save the world. By participating in the ground work, I came to realize that UN is just an internationally branded large-scale CSO. It doesn't have the mandate as the ultimate arbiter, and is often constrained by member states. Rather than glamorous work that makes the headline, we do easily overlooked but vital work that actually support the progression of civilizations.

As an idealist, I believe things will get better one day. Although we cannot prevent new problems, we can tackle existing ones.

I was offered a consultancy on communications after my UNV assignment. It sounds fancy but it's just a modality for non-permanent staff. Here I'm, continuing what I haven't finished, at the same time enjoying every second of it.



**COME
SEE FOR
YOURSELF**