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TRAVEL with



Northern Laos' 100 Waterfalls Trek

28 September 2012 | By Andy Jarosz

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A view of the Ou River in Laos. (Megan Ahrens/Getty)

Strictly speaking, the name of the [100 Waterfalls Trek](#) in northern Laos is misleading, since it is impossible to say how many waterfalls tumble through the thick jungle along the steady 10km ascent, with each one tumbling immediately into the next.

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The trail, which starts near the small town of Nong Khiaw not far from the tourism hub of Luang Prabang, was really only discovered by tourists in 2009, though it has been used by locals for years as a direct route between the scattered settlements of the Nam Ou valley. But in just four short years, the slow trickle of backpackers has turned into a steady stream of adventure travellers eager to experience the spectacular trail for themselves.

Getting to Nong Khiaw from Luang Prabang is an adventure on its own, with most people travelling three hours by *songthaew* (a pick-up truck converted to a passenger vehicle by adding a couple of benches along its side, allowing some 25 people to squeeze into its small frame). Stepping onto the main street of Nong Khiaw from the vehicle, it takes a while to shake off the bruised and slightly numb feeling that comes from riding along the heavily potholed roads of rural Laos.

The 100 Waterfalls Trek can only be tackled as a one-day tour from Nong Khiaw by [Tiger Trails](#), a Luang Prabang-based ecotourism company led by German founder Markus Neuer. A small portion of the tour cost goes toward helping local villages provide for their basic maintenance needs and infrastructure.

Starting from Nong Khiaw in the early morning, our guide Dhit sat quietly as we drifted around 10km downstream along the calm Nam Ou River in a narrow long-tail boat. Ladies who were busy washing their clothes in the murky water stopped to wave as we passed, while fishermen smoked silently in their boats -- a scene that would probably have looked the same 100 years ago. After an hour, we came to rest and we climbed up the riverbank to the tiny stilted-house settlement of Don Khoun, where we were joined by an additional village guide, provided as part of Tiger Trails' initiative to involve locals in the tourism activities.

The Lao government has plans to build a series of dams along the Nam Ou River, which would have a profound impact on the area. While the timing of the construction is not yet known, such a scheme would almost certainly lead to the forced resettlement of the Lao-Khmu community of Don Khoun, just as the residents have begun benefitting from tourism through their village. As for the waterfalls themselves, no-one yet knows how the damming plans for the Nam Ou might affect this natural wonder – so if you want to see it, now is the time to go.

On the following 45-minute hike through flat jungle terrain and along the edges of rice fields, the occasional screams from behind indicated that yet another blood-sucking leech was drinking from one of the eight trekkers in our group. Even so, as we began to hear the sound of gently tinkling water, Dhit invited us to remove our walking boots and change into our sandals: it was time to get wet.

We began our slow ascent through the shallows of the first group of waterfalls, the cool water reaching up to our ankles and providing welcome relief against the heat of the morning sun. For much of the way it was a gentle wade through shallow water, the wet rocks providing a surprisingly firm grip for both sandals and bare feet. Occasionally we used our hands to pull ourselves up large sets of smooth rocks, and as we climbed, the jungle grew denser and the waterfall became steeper. Soon the only sound was the water tumbling down to meet us, drowning out the voices of the other trekkers. At several points, the rocks were too high or the climb too steep, and fragile bamboo ladders or ropes had been placed to make the ascent a little easier.

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After 90 minutes of climbing up the increasingly powerful waterfalls, we reached the top of the trail. Ahead was a 20m high waterfall well beyond our climbing ability; below us the thick jungle canopy out of which we had just climbed. As we enjoyed the mist that sprayed off the thundering falls, our guide got to work cutting down banana leaves, laying them out as tablecloths and unpacking a splendid meal of cooked aubergine, fresh salad and omelettes.

Walking back to the village after lunch, the route followed a dry and pleasant jungle trail away from the waterfall. The path initially skirted the top of the canopy, offering extensive views of the Nam Ou valley below, before once again dropping into the shade of the jungle, providing welcome relief from the intense midday heat. For a little over an hour we followed the trail as it wound through the trees, crossing the occasional stream before arriving back in Don Khoun where our boat was waiting for the return journey to Nong Khiaw.

The 100 Waterfall Trek is not physically demanding, although the heat and humidity do add to the challenge. But the opportunity to experience the natural beauty of this little-known part of rural Laos should not be missed – especially as its long-term future is far from certain.

Practicalities

Bookings for the 100 Waterfalls Trail can be made at the Tiger Trails office next to the bus stop in Nong Khiaw or at their office in Luang Prabang, and the price per person depends on how many trekkers are going. Since the 100 Waterfall Trek starts in the morning, many visitors stay overnight in Nong Khiaw and walk to the Pat Hok caves, 3km out of town along the main road to the east. It was here that local villages were forced to find shelter during the Vietnam War, as American planes bombed the region heavily in an attempt to destroy communist sympathisers. An unstable ladder still leads to a cramped cave that served as the Bank of Luang Prabang between 1968 and 1974. Visitors are warned to stick to marked paths at all times as unexploded bombs are frequently discovered across much of northern Laos, often with tragic consequences.

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