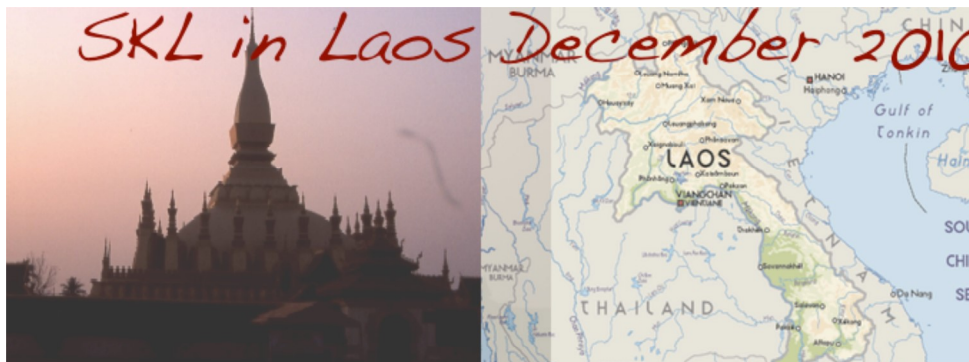


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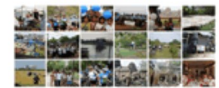
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Monday, December 27



Vientiane

This morning we had a second interview with the Lao National Television which was held at our house. The rest of the day will be devoted to tourism and shopping.

We'll be having dinner with Ken's family and friends later in the evening for the last goodbyes. And since this is the last entry in travel journal, we say goodbye to you too and thank you for following us! For those of you in Winnipeg, we'll see you soon!

- Cedric



Sunday, December 26



Vientiane's schedule is really beginning to get tight, however I'll still tell you about the farewell ceremonies which were held today to honor our departure, we as in the members of SKL and travelers from Kitchener who accompanied us in some parts of the trip. It started off with a religious ceremony conducted by five Buddhist monks, and ended in celebration with music, dance, food and let's not forget the Beer Lao! All this in the street / alley in front of Ken's brother's house and neighbors continuing their work as if nothing was happening. We were then invited to a second banquet in the evening. This time, it is Panoy who generously welcomed us for dinner at home.

-- Cedric



Saturday, December 25



Vientiane

Merry Christmas to all those following the stories of our travels in Laos! I know that it is actually already the 27th, but we do not always have the chance to go to the cybercafe. And you may have understood by reading the entry of Saturday's

December 24, I was not in great shape because I was sick for three days. As of the 23rd and 24th, I've had a fever, sore head, stomach ache... but I won't complain; it could have been worse. At least now I'm cured for the trip! Anyway I have not seen much of what happened on the 25th. I only know that the others are out shopping, and are far from coming back empty-handed. Setha and Ari went out in the evening and it is with regret that I had to decline the invitation ...

- Cedric





Friday, December 24



Sabaidee! Bonjour! Hello! Friday, December 24, 2010 - Time flies. It's already Christmas Eve. Our day was busy. Today - we met people and visited sites. Very beautiful videos shot by myself and Ken and numerous photographs were taken by Setha, Cedric and Ari.

For breakfast: Laotian sausages, dill omelets and of course the great baguette.

Close to the beautiful residence where we are currently staying, lives in a sculptor, Manith. We'll be visiting him later on today. Ken met him in 2009. He was glad to see that Ken again, for whom he had made jewelry for last year. We filmed carving section of rigid wood; a pensive Buddha which was attracting. In his small workshop which is very rudimentary, he worked with skill and patience using small tools. He will end this carving for Ken in the coming days.

Quickly after meeting with Manith, we made our way to the Wat Xieng Khuan Park. The accessing road is partially under repair, therefore you need a car in good condition and of course, a good driver- Kene, Panoy's nephew. We arrived there in about thirty minutes. This site was created in 1958 and is located near the Mekong. It was significantly smaller than I had imagined. The sculptures of Buddhist and Hindu influences are catchy to the eye. Many of the sculptures are close to each other. The reclining Buddha is impressive. The pumpkin in the dragon's mouth, allows a beautiful view of the whole park. After that, we made our way to Wat Inpeng near downtown Vientiane. This temple has colorful facades of guilded carved wood.

Mosaics of glass give it a unique cachet. Small temples nearby, home to religious figures, charmed by the bright and contrasted colors. These invite people to gather.

Next stop: shoot the sunset over the Mekong River's promenade, near the central statue. Beautiful shades of orange and pink. It is nearly 6 pm. Visitors rub shoulders along residents who walk on the wide sidewalk chatting. Children play soccer as well as sepak takraw. This new site seems quite popular. But major construction work does not allow us to appreciate the magnitude of the Mekong.

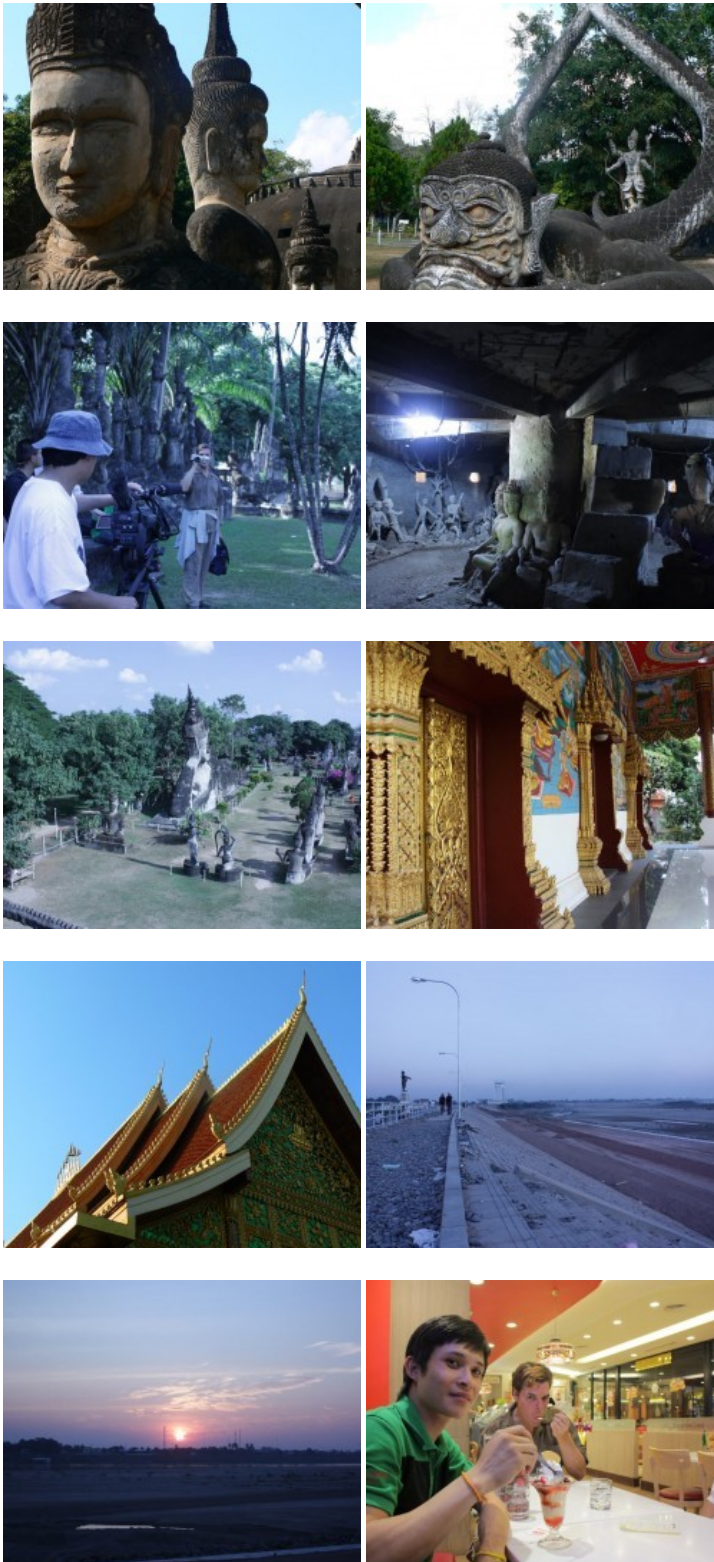
On our way back home, Ken offers us a treat: ice cream at Swensen's. Setha, Ari, Mel, Kene, Cedric, Ken and I feast on delicious sundaes before dinner. At home, we had a good dinner: delicious chicken soup, fragrant herbs, cabbage sprinkled with traditional oil, small pieces of beef bathed in locally grown vegetables and of course, some good hot rice.

Ken finds a solution to facilitate our departure to Bangkok. After numerous calls, an airline offers us a reasonable fare and schedule that can accomodate our group. We will leave on December 28 in the afternoon and we will fly from Undon Thani, Thailand near the Laos border to Bangkok, which will give us a little more time in Vientiane. While Ken has company over later in the evening, I discuss with

Sengkeo, Setha and Ari are out with Mel and friends. Cedric is still recovering. He needs sleep and gain strength. I chat with Ken until about midnight.

I'd like to wish everyone in Canada and elsewhere a merry Christmas!

-- Francois





Thursday, December 23



Vang Vieng

It is with a predictable delay that we drive this morning to Vang Vieng. Vang Vieng is a haven for tourists, a stop that is well known to backpackers travelling in Indochina. And it is true that the scenery is breathtaking ... almost as much as the countless tremors that jolt travelers going there by car. Above all, tourists that converge in this place, are not there for the green rocky peaks, nor the streams that run through its rice fields. What makes Vang Vieng so famous is the tubing and kayaking along a river where bars line up on its shores. Over time, attractions have been added: ballooning and hiking tours are now organized in Vang Vieng. However, to enjoy the arts, this is not the place to come. Seeing the faces around you would almost make you feel as if you were back in North America!

- Cedric



Wednesday, December 22



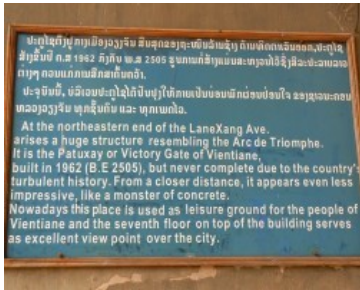
Vientiane



We started the day off with an interview with Le Rénovateur, French national weekly founded a decade ago this year, about our trip in Champasak province.

After the "task" of the day was over, we got busy with shopping. Given some differences in priorities of each member of our group, we decided to split up into two groups. While Ken and François visited a Chinese artist who in love with the Laotian culture and shop jewelry stores of the Talat Sao market, Setha, Ari and I went searching for t-shirts and postcards, with stops at Patuxay, the Laotian version of l'Arc de Triomphe and That Dam or "Black Stupa. After nightfall, we all gathered at home to eat and regain strength before our trip to Vang Vieng scheduled for tomorrow.

- Cedric



Tuesday, December 21



Paksane

Last night, when we got to this property, some of us had no idea where we were. It was dark and we were all tired from the the long day on the road. When we woke up this morning, we explored the property, and discovered that it was a huge

lakeside property, with many rooms for guests. We also discovered that this place belongs to an ex-Winnipegger we know as Pa Bounmy. The layout of her property was that of a lakeside resort. After breakfast, we took Pa Bounmy's two peddle boats onto the lake for a quick spin and played with her talking birds. We had a quick lunch and left for Vientiane, where Panoy was waiting for us at a local TV station for an interview. Once in Vientiane, we rushed to the TV station and filmed an interview that will air on Saturday. When we finally got "home" we took a few minutes to recharge our batteries and went out for dinner at a noodle house in downtown Vientiane. After dinner, we walked along the Mekong night markets and browsed the different boutiques and shops.

-- Cedric

December 16, 17, 18



Hi all,

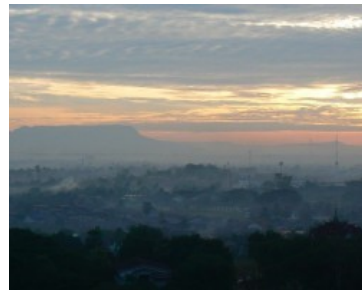
Due to a busy schedule and long hours on the road, it was nearly impossible for us to post about our last days. So, we'll try to summarize:

Thursday the 16th was a day of relaxation... or almost: in fact, we still managed to get up early (as usual) and meet up with André, a French expatriate working in the *Rénovateur*, a French-language weekly newspaper based in Vientiane. The *Rénovateur* reserved us a spot for an article about the inauguration of our second school in their next issue and we promised them an interview upon our return in Vientiane from Pakse. The rest of the day was devoted to tourism and shopping: That Luang, the most important temple in Laos which is the symbolic stupa of the capital, as well as ITECC, Vientiane's convention centre which also serves as somewhat of a compressed mall including the Tang Frères' supermarket, and to conclude the day, Setha, Ari and Cedric went out to karaoke to celebrate the birthday of a cousin.

Friday the 17th was the day of departure to Pakse. We had planned to leave at 7 am which is the equivalence 9 am in Laotian time, excluding a stop at the cyber café. The drive was expected to be around 12 hours but thanks to our driver's fearlessness of speed, we made it in about 10 hours including an hour meal stop and 2 other little stops. The drive was actually terrifying for some of us... especially after witnessing what could have been a fatal accident just a few meters in front of us. We were relieved to know that no one was seriously injured (nothing more than a fractured arm). The truck appeared to have been carrying a load that was well over its loading capacity, stacked up of casava roots. Obviously, we were in complete disbelief of what we had just witnessed and had to stop to try and help in any way we could. Luckily, the injured woman was taken away for aid by generous villagers near-by. In the meantime, we helped them get their numerous bags of Casava roots away from the truck in the hopes of making it lighter to attempt flipping the truck back on its wheels. Unfortunately, all the man power available at the site was not sufficient to flip over a truck. After the occupants of the truck assured us that we had done enough to help, we made our walk to the van and continued on our long "scary" journey.

Saturday the 18th was supposed to be a day of site-seeing. Instead, we met up with a local family that lead us to a village called Ban Niou, which was said to be needing a new school primary school building. The village authorities had apparently heard about our short notice visit and were very excited to welcome us. After having a good look at the school, we sat down and discussed about the school with the village authorities. According to them, there are 5 classrooms (1st grade - 5th grade), 5 teachers and around 450 students (divided in two groups: morning and afternoon). This would probably be SKL's biggest project to date (if we were to accept it). After a long morning of meeting, we stopped for our pho lunch and headed out to Wat Phou, which are now ruins of an ancient temple. Of course getting there took us a lot longer than expected and we ended up walking down the mountain in darkness. However, the long wait for the ferry was totally worth it as the view from the top of the mountain was amazing. **(to be continued...)**

-- Cedric



Monday, December 20



Paksé

We had first checked out Ban Ngiew primary school 2 days ago, it was Saturday, so we didn't get to see the children. That day, we only had the chance to speak to the village authorities who informed us that the school has approximately 450 students. Seeing that it was only a five classroom structure, we could not see how it could hold that many students. The village authorities let us know that some of the grades were taught in two separate shifts – a group of children for the morning class, and a different group in the afternoon. Even after knowing this, we still doubted that it could hold so many students.

We met up for our complimentary breakfast at the Champasak Palace Hotel this morning at around 7am. We wanted to check out from the hotel and head out the school around 8am so we could go see the potential project school in Ban Ngiew, just 21 kilometres outside of Paksé. After breakfast we immediately left for the village. Though we weren't sure we would select this village, Cedric and I drafted an agreement last night, just in case this would be our third project school.

When we arrived in the Ban Ngiew school yard, around 9:30am, the children were excited. This was a surprise visit. And we were indeed surprised when we saw the number of children in the classrooms... the rooms were packed. Just about every desk and every bench was occupied. We were now convinced that there were too many students for such a small school, but we needed to speak to the teachers to get a more accurate number so we could make a decision. After counting and calculating the number

of students in both the morning and afternoon shift, those who were sent to other schools, and those who were absent, we spoke to the village authorities about the changes that would need to take place if we were to consider building a school there. The school yard was much too small to accommodate all 400some students, and there would need to be more than the current five teachers. After hours of discussing the different possibilities, the village authorities assured us that finding more teachers would not be a problem, and they led us to a large plot of land at the entrance of the village, where we would be able to build. To avoid making an already long story longer, we discussed as a group, and decided that we were ready to undertake a project of this grandeur. We finally explained to the village authorities who we were, and what SKL does. They were very excited. We answered a few of their questions, and by 2pm we had signed an agreement and hit the road back to Vientiane.

We were all tired from the drive and stopped in Paksane to stay the night. In a daze, we stopped at a strange place where a woman whom my parents somehow knew led us to three different rooms to spend the night.

-- Cedric

Photos will be available here soon.

Wednesday, December 15



Vientiane

It is with a great sigh of relief that we all made it back « home » yesterday around midnight, after an exciting and lively evening. We were taken aback by the scale of the inauguration ceremony organized by the village. The school, usually standing proudly on its own on a big field was lost among the colourful tents, games and a big stage... and of course we were invited somewhat against our will to pronounce our speeches under the spotlight. Already it was an unforgettable evening; but it became even more so as we got over our initial timidity to join in the festivities, taking part in the dancing and the games, all the while making an effort in exchanging with the locals, with a certain difficulty for some of us; and it would not have been a “boun” (Laos for party) without the great tasting food and Lao Beer at will. Let us also highlight that Southida Panoy, the famous star of our Canadian concert tour, joined us for the occasion, making a noticed contribution to the show.

Now it is our departure to the South that we must prepare. But first, we intend to take a long awaited day to ourselves, and visit, with nothing else on our minds, Vientiane. Although we have been here for six days already, we have not stepped once in one of its innumerable temples!

-- Cédric

Tuesday, December 14



Today is the big day of inauguration of Ban Non Somboun Primary school. The ceremony does not start until 4pm, so we are taking this time to write our speeches. We will be meeting with Southida Panoy and make our way to the school a few hours before



the event.

-- Setha



Monday, December 13



We bought objects for the installation of the water pump. We are leaving in a few minutes. We will visit Ban Non Sonboum School, where we hope to shoot the ending of the installation of the pump, meet the kids at the school, and play with them.

-- François



We headed out to Ban Thachampa, the site of our first school, just a little past noon. In a van with no air conditioning, we were nine people being tossed like salad as we drove about 32 kilometres out of Vientiane, then 24 kilometres down an unforgiving road. At times, we were afraid the van's suspension would be compromised as it bounced in and out of crater sized holes.

The teachers and children greeted us upon our arrival in Ban Thachampa. We inspected the school and watched the children play in the school yard until the final bell rang. We were happy to see that the classroom looked more complete with wall calendars, educational posters, and pictures. We reluctantly got into the van to make our way back to the city.

When we got back to Vientiane, we had dinner with Philippe Depres, a French retiree who has been living in Laos for the past year. He spoke of his travels throughout South-East Asia and of his experiences while living in Laos. Philippe was a great help to SKL as he had performed spot checks and sent pictures of the construction in Ban Non Somboun and updated us on the progress.

-- Setha

Sunday, December 12



The SKL Team – we have done many things. We bought uniforms for the children of the school and two cabinets. The weather : very humid and hot – more than usually. We have to get used to it – drink water and find places with air conditioning.

-- François





Our days have been restless since our arrival. We only have two weeks left and still have so much to do. Everyday, we start out with a plan of all the things we want to get done, but everything takes longer than we expect. Trying to live the fast paced North American life out here just doesn't work.

After getting the uniforms and a few materials, we made our way to Ban Non Somboun to film the installation of the water pump. We also took this opportunity to take pictures with the children. Once our contractor was finished installing the pump, we filmed as it was successfully turned on to fill the basins in the washroom. Before we left, we placed the two newly purchased cabinets in the classrooms.

That evening, the Youth Committee attended a birthday party that was held in a front yard, complete with food, a dance floor a band, and lots of Beerlao. It was with the help of a few Beerlaos that we were able to get on the dance floor and dance with the locals. And yes, the Lao people don't care that it's Monday, they party hard everyday of the week.

-- Setha

Saturday, December 11



Hi all,

It's a cloudy, humid morning here in Vientiane which is highly unusual during this time of year, the dry season. Last night while having drinks on a rooftop patio, the rain suddenly came pouring down, taking us by surprise. Earlier yesterday, we went to a surprisingly modern hardware store to purchase the water pump.

Our plan had been to visit Ban Non Somboun for the installation of the water pump and visit Ban Thachampa all in the same day, but we had not taken into account the slower pace of life here. We ended up taking a pho (noodle soup) lunch break on our way to Ban Non Somboun and simply meeting with the district officials and planting trees in front of the new school. We plan to go back to Ban Non Somboun tomorrow to shoot the installation of the new water pump and the mounting of the plaques .

In our discussion with the district officials we decided on having the school opening ceremony on the evening of December 16th. This date was most convenient for the villagers but this meant making changes to our original itinerary. This morning we revised our itinerary over an egg, Nutella and French baguette (remnant of the French colonial era) from the local bakery. Our plan today is to make our way to the market to purchase new school uniforms, soccer balls and filing cabinets for the teachers. We also hope to have a little time left to visit the city.

-- Ari



Friday, December 10



I was well aware of the length of the trip from Winnipeg to Vientiane, yet it was only halfway through the second flight that this fact really hit me. This feeling was only reinforced by the thirty some hours that separated us from our destination, by the long flights, and bus ride, complete with 17 pieces of luggage and around 10 carry-on pieces for a total of 9 travellers. I don't even want to think of the awaiting challenge when we head back in 3 weeks.

My first impression of Laos was slightly ruined by the endless steps, as well as the chaos and confusion at the Laotian border, only amplified for one who does not understand the language. The dust and the intense heat was the cherry on top of the never ending road to our destination; in the end, the splendid view of the majestic Mekong River saved the picture.

Once on the other side of the border, the first thing to catch my attention is the great number of conspicuous billboards lining the road, signs, amongst others, of the recent opening of the country to foreign trade and influence. Indeed, though what I been told about Laos prior to the trip had prepared me for the strange blend of old and modern, I was nowhere near expecting it would be to reach such an extent. The most recent and important buildings would not be out of place on the busy streets of Winnipeg... especially the car dealers, sprinkled here and there among the chaos of metal roofed houses and store fronts.

To wrap things up, the food is delicious, flowers rival with beauty and store shelves abound with exotic fruits: it's more than what I had hoped for.

-- Cédric



Departure - Wednesday, December 8



The SKL Team has embarked on their personal trip to see the new Ban Non Somboun School, along with revisiting Ban Thachampa School and surveying for a new location for the third school project.

After departing onto a long flight on Wednesday December 8, they will arrive in Bangkok, Thailand on Thursday. A stop by the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok is scheduled. On ground, they will be travelling for more than 7 hours by bus northwards to the border reaching Vientiane, the capital city, by Friday December 10.

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