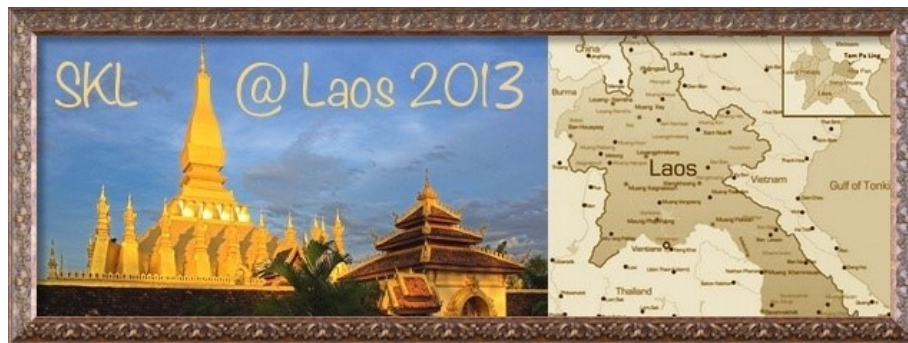


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5:21:25 am

Vientiane, Laos

We welcome your feedback or questions. [Please leave a comment.](#)

December 2

Final Blog

December 2, 2013

Tomorrow we fly to Bangkok and start our journey to Canada. I'm writing this final piece with mixed emotions – I am happy knowing that in a short while, I will see my family and friends back home. But Laos also feels like home and I am sad to leave this beautiful, friendly place.

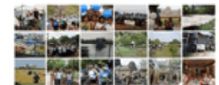
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SchoolForKidsinLaos

59



We've filled our final days with meeting new people and discovering more about the rural artisans who work in rattan and bamboo. In the small villages of Ban Phon and Na Gngang, we went right to the source and met with the weavers and craftsmen who create authentic Lao baskets and furniture. We were fascinated by a five-year old girl who is adept at weaving – it gave us hope that these skills will be passed down to future generations.



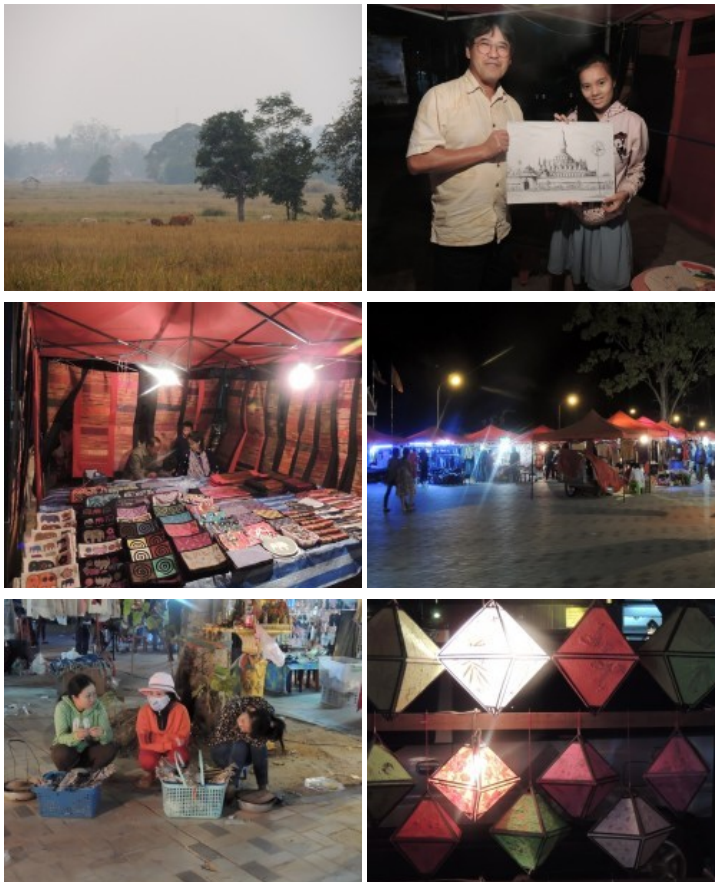
We met with filmmaker Peter Livermore who documents unique facets of Lao culture and his partner Houmnylat RattannavongLat, who owns an art gallery and is also interested in promoting education in rural areas.



And of course, the last days would not be complete without a visit to the Night Market! Bigger than ever, the tidy, red-canopied booths extend for several blocks on the promenade beside the Mekong River. We found artwork we couldn't resist and a few more colourful textiles to add to our growing inventory of beautiful Lao products.



Now it is time to pack – can I really fit three baskets into my carry-on? Goodbye from Vientiane...until next time!



November 30

Vientiane, Capital City

November 27 – 30

We've enjoyed exploring Vientiane the last few days. One can spend hours in the Talat Sao or "morning market" which is actually open all day. Here you find everything from TV's, fridges and other electronic appliances to textiles, clothing, souvenirs, gold jewellery and temple offerings! It is a maze of booths and shops although similar items are grouped together so you can comparison shop quite easily. We enjoyed a quick lunch in the "food court" before heading across town on a jumbo to visit a very busy factory.



This factory produces beautiful wood carvings and also statuary in cement, bronze and other materials. The exterior yard is chock full of buddhas and inside, you can see the craftsmen creating unique pieces in wood. Of course we made a few purchases, agreeing that we would worry later about how to get them back to Canada!



We discovered that there was a Trade Fair in town at the Lao International Trade Exhibition and

Convention Centre – the single largest venue in Lao PDR. So we hailed a jumbo and headed for the fair which turned out to be comprised primarily of modern products but we did find a vendor selling incredibly beautiful carved wooden furniture and two or three selling traditional Lao women's clothing. And in the food court, we purchased a tasty treat made from young rice which is naturally bright green in colour and served with shredded coconut.



Surprisingly, we met up with a group of students outside the bowling alley in the Centre. They told us they were here because classes had been cancelled due to a power outage at school. Ranging in age from 17 to 20, they were interested in speaking with us and curious about our presence in Laos. One of the young men was appearing in a fashion show that evening and invited us to attend. So later that day, we made our way to the Lao National Cultural Centre as instructed and were treated to a delightful show featuring creations based on traditional Lao dress as well as a selection of contemporary style dresses by young French-Lao designer Nithaya Somsanith. We were pleased that an accidental meeting at the Trade Fair resulted in our attending this unique event! Thank you to our student friends – Miss Vannida Sinbandith, Miss Vallaphone Phimmasone, Miss Onanong Xayyavath, Mr. Saysana Thammachack, Mr. Anonsith Choumlamouny, Miss Souminda Keolasvong and model Mr. Kitsana Choumlamouny.



The next morning, we visited a number of handicraft shops in Vientiane, several of them “fair trade” outlets, where the weavers and seamstresses receive fair prices for their extraordinary work. Of course, we made some more purchases, knowing that soon we will be leaving Laos.



November 28

Jumbo ride



November 24

Pakse and the Bolaven Plateau

This was a mixed day of work and education (that is, fun!). First we checked out a potential SKL project a few miles east of Pakse. Then, we headed up to Paksong on the Bolaven Plateau. The soil here is very rich (volcanic) enabling the farmers to produce many exotic fruits, vegetables, tea and coffee. From one of the many roadside stands, we bought egg bananas which are very small and sweet. We visited the Paksong market and bought sarongs! Finally, we stopped in at a local coffee and tea producer and had the good luck to meet the owner who was in the midst of roasting a batch of coffee beans from her plantation.

She took us one of her three plantations and showed us tea plants that were 40 years old. They prune the plants to keep them around 3 feet high. The very youngest leaves are picked for white tea, the slightly older leaves become black tea. They pick three times a day when the tea is ready. Her coffee plants were heavy with coffee beans – Arabica, Robusta and a hybrid – all naturally fertilized by a

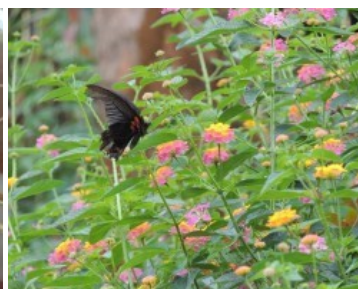
particular worm! But no pesticides are used at all, so her small shop legitimately displays a sign advertising “organic” tea and coffee.

Organic Coffee and Tea Plantation in Bolaven Plateau, Laos



We stayed a couple of hours and once again, I felt so fortunate to be experiencing Laos in way that most people cannot. We all made our purchases – being lucky enough to buy the coffee beans she had just roasted. Then we made our way back to Pakse, with memories of another wonderful day in Laos. Tomorrow, we visit two more potential sites for SKL, then head north to Vientiane.







November 23

Si Phan Don - 4,000 Islands

Our explorations today took us to a very laid-back part of Laos. During the rainy season, this 50-kilometre long stretch of the Mekong widens to 14 km which makes it the broadest section along its 4350 length (from Tibet to the South China Sea).

We took a passenger boat over to Don Det, one of the two largest islands, from the mainland and once ashore, hired a tuk-tuk to take us around the island. By law, the road around the island cannot be paved which helps maintain the serenity and pastoral quality of the region. The residents grow their own rice, sugar cane, coconut and vegetables and catch fish and weave textiles, making them somewhat self-sufficient. One stop on our journey provided a panoramic view of Cambodia.

Wat Phu Champasak

This ancient Khmer religious site was one of the highlights of our visit to Laos. There is a mystical feel to the terraced complex which stretches 1400 metres up the slopes of the Phu Pasak mountain range. The site has been a place of worship since the middle of the 5th century and features three main levels connected by a long promenade which is flanked by stone lotus buds. Although I didn't manage to make it to the very top (boy it was hot!), two members of our SKL team did and there is some wonderful video footage to prove they actually made it!

November 22

Ban Pakxoun Primary School Inauguration



November 21

Pakse, Laos

The official opening of school #4 in the village of Ban Pakxoun, was scheduled for 8:30 in the morning on November 20th. But because of the long distance from Vientiane to Ban Pakxoun, we drove to a nearby village, Pak Kading, the day before and stayed overnight (Ban Pakxoun has no accommodations). Mr. Khamphet, the senior official of the district school board, arranged a boat tour for us to a typical rural village, mainly accessible by boat.





The weather was very comfortable, around 25 degrees Celsius, with a light breeze and light cloud cover. The boat was long and stable, making the 20-minute ride quite comfortable. For a while, there was no sign of civilization at all. A flock of storks flew overhead and landed on a distant riverside tree. Then we rounded a bend and I could see the boat landing ahead of us on our left. On the right bank, a small ferry was filling up with school children on motorbikes returning to their village after a day at school.



The village was fairly large, spread out along a rutted road and the Nam Kading river. A few years ago, children playing with matches started a fire and managed to burn down a significant number of the bamboo and wood homes. Now one can see a mix of the original homes and new brick houses, usually painted very bright colours. The difference is striking. The villagers were quite curious about us – I don't think they see many visitors, especially Westerners. The village won't stay this way very long – there is cause to believe that a bridge will soon be built across the Nam Kading and that will undoubtedly bring change.



November 20

The school was festooned with fresh flowers and palm leaves for the inauguration. The children were all sitting quietly on plastic chairs under white canopies, not quite sure of what was going on. We were invited to speak and Ken officially handed over the school. Then local officials made their speeches, thanking SKL and promising to take good care of the new building. We presented our gifts of new school uniforms for every child, notebooks, pencils and erasers, a soccer ball, skipping ropes and Frisbees, which turned out to be the hit of the day!



The baci followed the official part of the program. We received hundreds of good wishes and many toasts were made! Then we were treated to a fabulous meal made with local ingredients including freshly harvested rice. The villagers were very generous to us and I felt extremely fortunate to be part of this wonderful gathering.



November 18



We've spent the last 2 days preparing for our trip to Ban Pakxoun and the school inauguration. The 56 new school uniforms were ready for us when we arrived at the factory. We received a donation of 200 notebooks so had only to purchase pencils, erasers and a shiny new soccer ball, also funded by a generous donor!



I've been enjoying the time in Vientiane. Each day, in the course of our activities, I see something new. And of course, I've been enjoying delicious authentic Lao food! Last night after dinner, we visited the Night Market which has expanded since last year – now there are even more beautiful Laotian items to tempt you! With my new purse and lovely textile in hand, I headed to my room to think about how fortunate I am to be here.



November 17

Viengkham Lower Secondary School

SKL Inc. is pleased to announce our 5th school construction project. Viengkham Lower Secondary School, located 2 1/2 hours drive north of Vientiane with 235 students from Secondary 1 to 4, will be the next recipient of our donors' generosity.

Since Viengkham Lower Secondary School lacks seating capacity to accommodate the 235 students, SKL Inc. will complement the existing school facilities with a fully furnished 5 classroom building, a deep well water supply, and sanitary washrooms.

Please help us make this a reality by making your donation to this project today.

School Inauguration

Pakxoun Primary school Inauguration!

SKL Inc. is delighted to announce the official inauguration of the newly built Ban Pakxoun primary School which will take place on **November 20th**, 2013 at 8:30 AM.

Stay tuned!

November 16

A Rooftop Surfer in Vang Vieng, Laos



November 15

Vangvieng November 2013



We pulled into the school grounds of Viengkham Secondary School right on time after a 2-hour drive northwest from Vientiane. I recognized several teachers and officials we met last year during our preliminary visit. They welcomed us warmly and we were pleased to hear that they are able to make a significant contribution to the proposed school in the form of labour, lumber and sand and gravel. This is an important aspect of SKL's agreement with each community. We officially confirmed our commitment to work with them to build new classrooms for the students of Viengkham Secondary School.





The Principal, Mr. Kingkeomanivong, several teachers and local officials representing six villages, sealed the deal with a toast and a delicious lunch made in our honour – true Lao hospitality! I was very proud to be part of the process which will result in another new school for rural children in Laos.

Now on to Vang Vieng for some R and R!



November 14

November 14, 2013



November 13

Vientiane, Laos

At 9 am, the temperature is already 27 degrees Celsius but it feels like 37 with the humidity. I have had a few days to acclimatize as we enjoyed various celebrations related to the wedding of Ken's niece, Phimmala.

I was honoured to be included in the festivities and even participated as a “gatekeeper” at the traditional wedding ceremony, preventing the groom and his entourage from entering the bride's home until he paid an appropriate dowry!



Yesterday, the SKL team made the three-hour drive to Ban Pakxoun to inspect our newest school prior to the official opening. I clearly remember a year ago, hammering out the details of our agreement in front of the dilapidated structure they used for their school. Now, the brand new three-room school almost sparkles in the afternoon sun. I feel very proud to have played a part in making it a reality and everyone back home who supports SKL should feel the same way!



The children are working hard, but as soon as we peek into their classrooms, they are fixated on us. We take many pictures and at first, they are somewhat reluctant to smile but soon, they are posing precociously and flocking to the camera! We arrange a date for the official opening and head back to Vientiane, very pleased with Ban Pakxoun's new school and excitedly anticipating the celebration to come.



Tomorrow, we head north to visit a potential SKL project and then on to Vang Vieng for a look at some of Laos' beautiful scenery!



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