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**Covid-19 and Post-Covid Transitions:
Case Material from the Lao People's Democratic
Republic in a Southeast Asian Context**

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Abstract

During the past two decades the Southeast Asian region (ASEAN) has experienced a range of serious crises affecting the tourism industry and related services, including natural and environmental disasters, epidemics and pandemics, global financial slumps, terrorist actions and political and military conflict. The latest challenge has been the “Novel Coronavirus” (Covid-19/SARS-CoV-2) pandemic which began to make a profound impact from the first half of 2020. It has had damaging consequences for tourism development and economic growth in all the ASEAN countries, but some have suffered more than others. These difficulties are set to continue in 2023 and into 2024; though there are signs of recovery and of the resilience of the tourism industry. The paper examines this process of post-Covid-19 recovery, taking the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) as a case study, and giving consideration to the continuities and discontinuities in the tourism industry and the transition from the environment of lockdowns and restrictions to the re-opening of borders and the increasing movements of people. Tourism in the Lao PDR is rather neglected in the literature and attention to how the country is faring in its attempts to retrieve its 2019 pre-pandemic position is crucial in attempting to understand how the tourism industry there will develop in the next several years. Tourism was the major source of foreign exchange in 2019 and its decline has therefore amplified the economic pressures which the Lao PDR is continuing to experience.

Keywords: Tourism; post-Covid recovery; Lao PDR; transitions; continuities; discontinuities

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Introduction

The Southeast Asian Context

The Covid-19 pandemic has eased, generally restrictions on movement have been removed, travel across borders has become less difficult, lockdowns and social distancing have ceased, but the virus and its transmutations have not disappeared, though they are generally less severe, and infections are still with us as are deaths from the virus. Nevertheless, the availability of vaccinations and the increase in levels of immunity have meant that tourism, both domestic and international, whilst it has not yet returned to its pre-pandemic condition, is on the way to retrieving that position in the global economy. Tourism enterprises have re-opened, but certainly not all of them, and employment in the tourism industry has still to achieve its pre-pandemic levels.

Day-by-day Covid cases continue to occur along with deaths, but not at the rapid rate that we witnessed in 2020 and 2021. They fell considerably from the second half of 2022 with some blips, and then even more so from February 2023. As of 30 January 2024, cases worldwide stood at 702,478,971 and deaths at 6,974,416; there were still 72,199,218 currently infected, and 36,448 in a serious or critical condition (Worldometer, 2024). The ASEAN member states have reported a total of 36.942 million cases and a total of 302,578 deaths, since the start of the pandemic with Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia recording most cases, 11.624 million, 6.826 million and 5.269 million respectively, and Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam the most deaths, 161,954, 66,864 and 43,206 respectively (ibid.). Lao PDR (alternatively Laos) only reported 218,915 cases, the ninth lowest of the ten ASEAN countries,

with 758 deaths; Cambodia, the lowest, in the number of cases reported, only 138,082, but 3,056 deaths, therefore above the Lao PDR. Brunei Darussalam, with 338,569 cases had the lowest number of deaths in ASEAN, at 225, but the small size of the population at around 450,000 needs to be taken into account. However, there is a problem of the reliability of the statistical data, because levels of testing vary considerably across ASEAN. Lao PDR was the lowest in testing per million of population (around 165,000) along with Cambodia (180,000) and Myanmar (210,000). In more remote rural areas and where medical facilities and testing kits less accessible, it is likely that some cases went unreported, or were wrongly diagnosed. In fact, there are also frequent problems in determining whether a death is caused by the virus or by other conditions and complicating factors. What is also interesting is that in some countries the record of the number of cases and deaths may fall in any given period.

In regard to visitor arrival statistics to ASEAN, in 2018 they stood at 135.17 million, and then in 2019 the highest ever figure was reached, just before the virus took hold, at 143.61 million. In 2020, arrivals plummeted to 26.16 million, and in 2021 they fell to an all-time low at 2.95 million (Statista, 2023a). They then began to pick up in 2022. The total for January-June 2023 stood at 46.5 million with 43% of the visitors coming from the region. An ASEAN statistical brief on tourism in November 2023 entitled “The Slow Path to Recovery”, with a “lacklustre” performance in 2022 and a “modest recovery” in the first half of 2023 (from January to June), suggests that visitor arrivals may get to 80%-85% of pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2023, though this will vary between countries (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023a). In its *Annual Report 2022-2023: ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth*, it states that tourism in the region is “experiencing positive growth” and it refers to plans for the post-pandemic future in *The Framework on Sustainable Tourism Development in ASEAN in the Post-COVID-19 Era*, agreed in early 2023 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b: 29; *Framework*, 2023c). Positive post-pandemic progress calling for “a more innovative and competitive tourism” was also reported at the 26th Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers in Yogyakarta on 4 February 2023 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023d). The regrowth of the tourism industry is hardly surprising, when the statistics for visitor arrivals in 2021 totalled 2.949 million, and only Indonesia (1,557,500), Thailand (472,000) and Singapore (330,900) attracted more than 300,000 visitors. Intra-ASEAN cross-border movements accounted for almost a million. The Lao PDR did not submit a return for 2021, compared with its arrivals of 4.791 million in 2019, suggesting that these were negligible, following a figure of 886,447 for 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022; Wikipedia, 2023a).

However, the total for “The Number of Visitor Arrivals by ASEAN Member States 2022” is rather misleading. ASEAN provides a figure of 43.2 million, with intra-ASEAN visitors comprising almost 50% of the movements, keeping in mind that in 2019 there were 146.3 million arrivals. However, the figures for Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Myanmar relate to 2021 and that for Vietnam is 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023e). The later statistics for 2022 and 2023 appear to be more reliable. For the first half of 2023, January to June, it is recorded that visitor arrivals to ASEAN reached 46.5 million, with 43% of them from ASEAN, 8.2% from the People’s Republic of China [PRC, henceforth China], 8.1% from the Republic of Korea [ROK, henceforth South Korea], and 6.9% from the European Union [EU] (ibid.).

Depending on which ASEAN countries are examined, for example those with substantial tourism industries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam), there is a more optimistic sense of “revival”, “recovery” and “acceleration” (The Diplomat, 2023; and see JLL, 2022; UNWTO [United Nations World Tourism Organization], 2023), though reforms and adaptation are also needed, along with diversifying inbound destinations, promoting domestic tourism and addressing labour challenges (OECD Library, 2023). Even among the countries with a large tourism sector, there are differences in levels of performance and success. Yet in a review up to July 2023 which features recovery rates of ASEAN countries in terms of visitor arrivals, Cambodia came first, then Vietnam and Singapore. Cambodia and Vietnam were benefiting from the East Asian, especially the Chinese and wider East Asian market, and Thailand and Indonesia (particularly with the importance of Bali and to some extent Java) were again attracting international tourist interest. The Lao PDR did not appear in this list, surprisingly neither did Malaysia nor the Philippines (Outbox 2023). Yet the UNWTO, in very optimistic fashion, suggests that arrivals could reach 80% to 95% of pre-pandemic levels at the end of 2023, and that Cambodia and Lao PDR are likely to achieve the highest recovery rate at 77% and 75% respectively, whilst Myanmar and Brunei Darussalam are at the lowest level, 15% and 34% respectively (though it has to be noted that tourism is a relatively small sector in Brunei in terms of contribution to GDP); the remaining ASEAN countries are expected to be between 65% to 69% recovery (UNWTO, 2023).

In terms of the contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in ASEAN there was, as we would expect, a considerable decline after 2019 from US\$ 379.9 billion to around 50% less in 2020 at US\$ 180.21 billion and a further drop in 2021 at US\$ 148.25 billion. There was a welcome turnaround in 2022 at US\$ 241.7 billion, and one forecast suggests an approximate

figure of US\$ 306.4 billion for 2023 (Statista, 2023). An interesting statistic is that for domestic tourism expenditure in Southeast Asia in 2022, which, coming out of the pandemic, is a significant contribution to GDP. It decreased to US\$ 100.82 billion in 2021, and then picked up to US\$ 145.9 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2023c).

The future is still somewhat uncertain. The *ASEAN Travel Agreement* was formulated and signed at the Eighth ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh on 4 November 2022. Its main thrust was for government to engage more closely with the private sector in the expectation that this would improve the efficiency and competitiveness of the tourism sector [though some governments in ASEAN work more comfortably with the private sector than others]; facilitating intra-ASEAN and international travel and providing greater market access [in the post-pandemic era the domestic and wider Asian market is being given more emphasis]; joint marketing and promotion [this has worked rather well, but member states still tend to focus on their own national promotional campaigns]; the safety and security of tourists [this places undue demands in most ASEAN countries on the police, security and health services which are not that well-resourced and equipped to undertake]; the development of human resources [this is a more demanding task, given that a proportion of workers live and operate in the informal sector, do not work for companies and agencies and are outside the institutions which preside over tourism] (ASEAN Tourism Sector, 2020).

The *Post-COVID-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism* is even more demanding than some of the proposals and principles set down by the ASEAN Tourism Sector (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). Given the kinds of tourism that are offered and organised in Southeast Asia and the social, cultural and economic environment within which many people work, particularly migrant labourers, rural populations and ethnic minorities, manual workers and those with lower, non-transferable skills and education, coupled with the reduction in resources, finance and labour during the pandemic, and the associated lack of government support for some sectors of the industry in some of the ASEAN countries, then certain of the proposals seem to be more hopeful than realistic, though they are necessary, such as the need to improve communication across countries, sectors and between the public and private sectors (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

Other proposals entail considerable funding and support, the necessary skills and training and a committed, efficient and well organised set of agencies and institutions to turn policy into practice and ensure funds are directed to the most appropriate people who need

support and those who will produce results. The Recovery Plan also includes: the need to embrace digital technology and innovative solutions [this is often a reaction to difficult circumstances and there have been spectacular failures in this area]; “health patrols” to improve visitor safety and security [in a post-pandemic situation which requires the extension of more basic health care for the local population, then tourist health patrols might seem something of a luxury]; the reinvention of tourist services [this usually comes from the private sector and entrepreneurs, though government is important in providing infrastructure and appropriate funding and support, and it does require very close cooperation between government and the private sector], the need for preparedness and resilience for future crises [resilience is certainly a quality shown in various tourism sectors in Southeast Asia in the face of past crises, but whether governments can truly prepare themselves and their citizens for the unexpected is a moot-point, and with climate change and accompanying natural and environmental disasters, then preparing for pandemics, with very little knowledge of what to expect in the way of global viruses and transmutations in particular, is highly problematic]; enabling sustainable and inclusive recovery [sustainability is another very difficult issue, and when post-pandemic mass tourism returns, as seems to be happening with the recent surge in Chinese package tourism, then sustainability for those involved in welcoming large numbers of tourists is not something that is uppermost in their minds]; and providing the right levels of support for the sector [resources are finite, choices have to be made, and some sectors in a given country might well not be able to be funded and supported, whichever policies and plans are in place].

Most of these recommendations are echoed in the *Lao PDR's Tourism Covid-19 Recovery Roadmap 2021-2025* (UNDP 2021): diversification of markets, products and strategic priorities; more engagement between government and the private sector [keeping in mind that the main tourism sites are dominated by the private sector]; invest in market intelligence, training and digital platforms and tools and a communication strategy; boost marketing and brand identity. It also included “tourism support packages” and the provision of businesses with liquidity; [though the Lao PDR government agencies were hard-pressed to provide this kind of support during the pandemic] (ibid.). Given the rather parlous post-pandemic financial situation that the Lao PDR government has had to face, and the lack of certain skills and expertise available to it, the proposals and policies are admirable, but the implementation will present formidable difficulties, particularly in the field of digital platforms and tools, and training. Marketing and a communication strategy might be easier to implement.

Earlier reports by aid-driven research projects designed to present recommendations to the Lao PDR government provide similar advice, and they did so even before the pandemic. The Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], in its focus on Luang Prabang, proposed: diversification, coordination and integration of tourism activities, based on the country's diverse cultural and natural assets, whilst preserving these and creating awareness of their importance in maintaining Lao identity and heritage [not an easy balance to strike]; improve the quality of tourism services; train and educate those [or at least some of them] who work in the tourism industry; and provide resources from tourism to improve the lives of those in local communities (2016). The report noted, which is a more general issue in tourism in Southeast Asia, the considerable number of women involved in the industry, particularly in handicrafts, market-place activities, cultural performances and other entertainments. Recent reports and surveys undertaken by [The] World Bank (2022, 2023), looking forward to a post-pandemic era, pointed to the lack of market intelligence in the Lao tourism industry and the knowledge of some of the sources of visitors and how to attract them; in certain sub-sectors low service standards were identified and the lack of skills in language and tour-guiding expertise; emphasis was placed on the importance of developing nature-based tourism and building the domestic and regional market (Thailand, China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan). Though it was acknowledged that a small proportion of tourists to Lao PDR comprise visitors from the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Europe, they tend to stay longer and spend more at the higher-end package market and pay for more expensive accommodation.

Post-Pandemic Tourism in the Lao PDR: Context and Background

In many areas of academic investigation the “land-locked” Lao PDR has been neglected and certainly in the field of tourism studies, although there have been important general volumes in Lao ethnography, history, politics and geography (see, in particular, Barber, 1979; Chazée, 2002; Evans, 1999, 2002; Godineau, 2003; Halpern, 1964 [1965]; Ngaosrivathana, and Breazeale, 2002; Pholsena 2006; Rehbein, 2010, 2017; Stuart-Fox, 1982, 1986, 1997; Stuart-Fox and Creak, with Rathie, 2003; Stuart-Fox and Mixay, 2010; Zasloff and Unger, 1991). Among these, probably Martin Stuart-Fox has been the most productive and influential of observers; Joel Martin Halpern is the pioneer in the ethnographic study of Laos; Grant Evans' writing on the Lao PDR two decades ago is an especially important and wide-ranging reference; and Boike Rehbein is, in my view, one of the most innovative in furthering our

knowledge and understanding of the politics and sociology of the country; Pholsena Vattthana has also made an important contribution.

The selection just listed gives us a conspectus of the character and transformation of Lao PDR and its cultural and ethnic diversity in that, depending on the ways in which ethnic identities are defined, there are said to be around 50 ethnic groups (some sources give us less, some give more), and there are four major ethno-linguistic categories represented: Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman and Hmong-Ioumien (Evans, 1999; Chazée, 2002). What adds to this diversity is the set of transformations which Lao PDR has undergone from a command economy to a more open one, having to address such issues as migration into and out of the country and economic changes occasioned by progressive integration into a market economy and all that accompanies increasing consumerism and the influence of social and cultural globalisation. In examining migration, rural-urban relations, poverty and resilience, livelihoods and rural development Jonathan Rigg captures these processes in terms of “living with transition” (2005). This notion of “transition” is also apposite in considering tourism and its post-Covid condition. The complexity is both a challenge to academic research and an important attraction for tourists.

What is significant in a post-pandemic Southeast Asia is that, as a land-locked country, Lao PDR is surrounded by several neighbours, all of them demographically larger and three of them economically more prominent than Laos. Examining perceptions and characterisations of Laos, Rigg refers to it “as [a] forgotten land, lost, half-formed and remote” (2005: 46). Yet, as his work also demonstrates, its peripheral status, wedged between five other countries gives it an integrating role in mainland Southeast Asia where peoples from other countries meet and intermingle, not least in the tourism sector. On the northern border there is the People’s Republic of China [PRC] (China); to the north-west is the Republic of Myanmar; the Socialist Republic of Vietnam shares the whole of the Lao eastern border; the Kingdom of Cambodia is located to the south; with the Kingdom of Thailand occupying most of the Lao western border. The connections with Thailand are also expressed in the four Thai-Lao “Friendship Bridges” across the Mekong with a further two agreed and in process.

This is an interesting, though we might suggest a precarious position, for Lao PDR. It is interesting in the field of post-pandemic tourism development in that Laos is surrounded by important sources of tourists and tourism revenue, particularly from China and Thailand, and to a lesser extent Vietnam; precarious in that it could become a target for tourism exploitation

and marginalisation on the part of larger and more economically powerful neighbours. Yet, with the post-Covid shift in emphasis in Southeast Asia to domestic and regional tourism it would seem that Lao PDR is ideally placed to take advantage of its location and to attract tourists in larger numbers from surrounding countries and to perform what might be termed an “integrative function”.

Historically this constant pressure from the outside reflects Lao PDR’s current status and its artificial construction as an “imagined” state: late nineteenth century competition for territories in what is now Lao PDR between the French and the Siamese; the establishment of a French protectorate; the brief, though severe, Japanese occupation; independence from the French in 1953 leading to a civil war between the communist Pathet Lao supported by Vietnam and the Soviet bloc and the Royal Lao Government backed by the United States and facilitated by Thailand; then the establishment of a Pathet Lao revolutionary government in 1975, the dissolution of the monarchy and the formation of a Soviet-style one-party command economy; and recently the turn to a more open Western-style economy from the late 1980s (Harrison and Schipani, 2009: 167; Stuart-Fox, 1997).

In the study of tourism in Laos the substantial publications are few and far between. A very useful comparative study in mainland Southeast Asia on the development of tourism in Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, as their borders and economies began to open up to international visitors, was undertaken by C. Michael Hall at the turn of the century when arrivals in Lao PDR were moving towards the one million mark (2000). After 15 years of tourism expansion from 1990 when the first national tourism development plan was published and when visitor arrivals numbered a meagre 14,000, through the second plan in 1998 which witnessed a visitor level at 500,200, and by 2005 (and see Lao National Tourism Authority [LNTA], 2006), the arrivals totalled 1,095,315, generating US\$ 146 million in tourism receipts and comprising 7% to 9% of GDP (Tourism Development Department, 2021; Sensathith, 2011; Yamauchi and Lee, 1999). In 2005 a tourism plan was formulated and in 2006 the Lao Tourism Strategy 2006-2020 was released. It should be noted that in the first couple of decades of tourism development the Lao PDR statistics are not entirely reliable.

Probably the most authoritative overview papers on the development of tourism in Lao PDR with its emphasis on conventional sightseeing, eco- and adventure-tourism, pro-poor tourism, community-based tourism, and cultural-heritage tourism, are by Harrison and Schipani (2007, 2009; and see Schipani, 2002). They point to the fact that, though patchy,

tourism development as a pro-poor strategy among minorities and rural communities, was having a positive effect. However, in a country with a wide range of potential natural and cultural assets for tourism, the infrastructure does not facilitate access. Indeed, there is a concentration of tourism activity in particular sites: Vientiane, Vang Vieng, the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Luang Prabang and Vat Phou, and the wider Champassak Province, and Savannakhet City. This is, not surprisingly, where the main provision of tourist accommodation is to be found.

The natural and cultural attractions of Lao PDR are considerable. There are vast areas of tropical monsoon forest, numerous ethnic minorities, unspoiled countryside (apart, that is, from the areas bombed by the USA during the Secret War) and a virtually undeveloped hinterland away from the main tourist honeypots (Harrison and Schipani, 2009: 182).

There have been numerous publications which address specific issues prior to the pandemic (for example, Nonthapot and Ueasin, [2014], on the importance of Thai visitors to Lao PDR for economic growth; Sensathith, [2013], who provided an ethnography of tourism and heritage; the Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], [2016], which collected a range of data on Luang Prabang before Covid-19; Zhang and Zhang [2017] on small enterprises and sustainable development; Bounmixay and Ton on tourist attitudes and behaviours towards Lao PDR (2020); and Phommavong on tourism as a means to address poverty (2011). The great promise of an expanding tourism industry in Laos was captured in *The Diplomat* before the disaster of the pandemic in that the Visit Laos Year 2018 expressed “the hospitality and friendliness of the local people” and that it had developed “a destination image” (Kang, 2018).

The most insightful work on heritage tourism and the perspectives, interpretations, senses and feelings that different constituencies bring to it are captured in David Berliner’s exploration of the concept of nostalgia and the notion of a “heritagescape” in the context of Luang Prabang (2012a, 2012b). As a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS), Berliner also explores the politics of heritage (2010). Of all tourist sites in Lao PDR Luang Prabang commands our attention (Lenaerts, 2016; Vallard, 2016). It has long been established that when a global body such as UNESCO intervenes in a site to protect and conserve it, this international agency also transforms it, and “creates aesthetic forms” and “historical narratives” (Berliner, 2012b; 234); in other words, it reconstructs and recreates a site, and, though its objective is to preserve global heritage, it frequently presides over processes of gentrification, the refashioning of buildings, commercialisation, the reorganisation of social and economic

relationships for those who live in or near these sites, and the encouragement of mass tourism with all the problems that this brings (King, 2016). Berliner captures some of these concerns in his work on “nostalgia” in Luang Prabang, and the ways in which different actors, engaged in these heritage sites (political elites, UNESCO experts, international and domestic tourists, Buddhist monks and local residents) express and display notions of preservation, transmission and loss (2012b).

Lao PDR from 1990 embarked on a programme of poverty eradication, and one of its tools was the promotion of international tourism, supported by overseas aid, to bring in much needed foreign exchange. Figures from the Asian Development Bank indicate that in 2022 18.3% of the population were below the National Poverty Line (NPL), thus approaching one-and-a-half million Lao citizens, and, in comparison with other ASEAN countries it had a low annual GDP, in 2022 of US\$ 16.1 billion (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2023). Funding and loans came from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Manila, The World Bank, UNESCO, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and NGOs and government aid agencies in Canada, USA, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, the Netherlands (SNV [Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers/Foundation of Netherlands Volunteers]), among others. By 1995, this strategy became a priority in such fields as ecotourism, and by 1999 tourism had become the primary foreign exchange generator of Lao PDR (Schipani, 2002). Interestingly, the impetus came from Lao PDR’s success in attracting tourists from neighbouring countries. Its main source of tourists is from within the East and Southeast Asian region.

The Pandemic

The impact of the pandemic during the two years between mid-2020 up to May 2022 on Lao social, cultural and economic life was profound. The Lao PDR did not have the resources, funds, or medical infrastructure to provide support and safety-nets for a considerable proportion of its population. It also had the problem of Lao migrant labour working overseas, especially in Thailand, China, Japan and Vietnam, returning home, as well as those from the Golden Triangle SEZ [Special Economic Zone] on the Lao PDR-Myanmar border (leased for 75 years to a Chinese businessman through an agreement with China). It was estimated that over 200,000 Lao returned in 2020 alone out of an approximate Lao migrant population of 900,000, primarily young males and females between 14 to 24 years of age (Denny and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). The results were obvious, social dislocation and stigma (especially

for those trafficked), unemployment and financial difficulties both for the returnees and those at home reliant in part on remittances, and mental health issues (ibid.). Any rights and entitlements that they had were almost impossible to access.

A United Nations-Lao PDR government survey of 1,200 households across 120 communities, and 350 micro- and small enterprises in June 2020, stated that:

The Government of Lao PDR was swift in enacting preventative measures, including an early lockdown and ongoing travel restrictions. This has helped keep the health crisis to a minimum, but it has not insulated the country from the extensive socio-economic impact as domestic and regional supply chains collapsed, along with household incomes and consumer demand (2020: ii).

It makes particular reference to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Luang Prabang: As a province, Luang Prabang has been affected most heavily. During the lockdown, businesses related to tourism lost around 80% of their income compared to the same period in 2019, a situation exacerbated by about 40% of hotel guests being asked to leave hotels at the start of the lockdown without payment. The Luang Prabang Tourism Association estimated that 80-90% of its members could go bankrupt without support or an improvement in the situation (ibid.41).

The hotel-restaurant sector was hardest hit when incomes dropped to almost zero, and it is estimated that 80% of the staff were laid off and a number of hoteliers were searching around to sell their hotels. Those who were innovative were switching to the domestic market and offering generous discounts.

Researchers at USAID reported that in 2020 the Lao PDR economy had experienced its lowest growth rate in 30 years, and that services, tourism and handicrafts were badly affected, and the remittances from Lao migrant workers in Thailand, China, Japan and other countries in the region had reduced dramatically, as they returned home without employment (Gunawardena and Phathamavong, 2021). A report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in June 2020, based on online questionnaires and operator-assisted phone interviews, in August 2019 and May 2020 took a pessimistic view of the immediate future: from March 2020 land borders were closed, international aviation cancelled, domestic travel restricted, physical distancing imposed, tourist visas suspended, international entry airports closed; domestic travel across provinces suspended; businesses were closed, working capital was reduced considerably; but owners were reluctant to borrow; 70% of employers had reduced their staff,

many of them simply dismissed; of the 327 enterprises surveyed half of them had temporarily closed. The summary of this crisis was that “the onset of COVID-19 is expected to have a devastating impact on tourism enterprises in the Lao PDR” (Takashi et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] Report in October 2021 put the decline in visitor arrivals at 74% from 2019 and the revenue loss at 70% to 80%, keeping in mind the contribution of the tourism industry to the Lao economy at that time amounted to just over 9%, with tourist receipts of US\$ 934 million, and employment at around 300,000 (UNDP, 2021). These pressures continued after the UNDP Report until recovery began from mid-2022 so that the decline would have been even greater beyond October 2021.

A report on the impact of Covid-19 in January 2022 based on research into workers at major Lao tourism sites (Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang and Pakse) indicated that the majority of women and older workers were badly affected in that they were often unaware of their rights or entitlements, and even then, were reluctant to assert these and to enter negotiations with employers; some male workers were more inclined to do so. Another category of workers that suffered were those with low levels of education, lacking transferable skills (Rassapong et al. 2022; and see Luxembourg Aid and Development [LuxDev], 2021). It was found that labour laws and rules agreed and set down in government documents were unclear, unknown or ignored. A considerable number of individuals received no compensation or benefits, or continued “virtual employment” with no pay to tide them over the crisis; the more fortunate had their pay cut by 20% to 50%, many were summarily dismissed without notice and any severance pay (ibid.). One of the consequences of these problems faced by workers was that socio-economic inequalities in Lao PDR increased quite dramatically. But some workers also understood the plight of the owners of micro-, small and medium-sized businesses; many closed, some were rendered bankrupt. The most severe impacts were experienced in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

A report from the World Bank emphasised that, during the pandemic over two-thirds of households reduced their education levels in that many of them did not have access to online delivery, nor were they capable of teaching and instructing their children at home ([The] World Bank, 2022).

Of course, a number of studies relating to policy and practice in the tourism sector which preceded the pandemic became rapidly dated, though not entirely irrelevant, given the enormity of the results of the actions that governments had to take to attempt to contain the spread of the virus (see, for example, Luxembourg Aid and Development [LuxDev], 2021).

Lao PDR: Post-pandemic

Lao PDR reopened its borders to foreign visitors on 9 May 2022. It withdrew all its previous quarantine requirements for those travellers who presented clear evidence of vaccination. Lao travel operators, hotels, restaurants, at least those that had survived the pandemic, since a significant number of enterprises had gone out of business never to return, were preparing for an anticipated influx of visitors. During the pandemic, and after identifying the first case of Covid in March 2020, Lao PDR enforced a first lockdown from 1 April 2020, and after a “second wave” of Covid infection, a further lockdown from 22 April 2021. It also closed its borders, ceased the granting of tourist visas, and enforced social distancing and other restrictions on movement.

A feature article on the Xinhua News Agency website for 10 February 2023 is entitled “Laos looking forward to return of Chinese tourists” (Xinhua, 2023a). It referred to the Lao Tourism Management Department in the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism working with the private sector (travel agencies, hotels and tourism-related businesses) to retrieve the position that Laos had lost during 2020, 2021 and into 2022. The Ministry’s intention has been to give tourism top priority in contributing to Lao PDR economic growth, by, among things, improving the quality of facilities for Chinese tourists, diversifying tourism products and activities, training Chinese-speaking (and Korean-speaking) staff in both the public and private sectors, promoting nature-based tourism and “the greening of tourism”, and presenting the cultural and heritage assets of Laos. In this regard, reference was made to the Ministry’s *Lao Tourism Recovery Plan for 2021-2025* and the expectation of attracting 1.4 million visitors to the country in 2023. Reference was also made to the high-speed Laos-China Railway (LCR) from Kunming in Yunnan to Vientiane which is already providing a significant boost in the attraction of inbound Chinese tourists, as well as the increase in Lao Airlines flights to China from Vientiane to Kunming, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chengdu, Changzhou and Hangzhou.

The Laos-China Railway runs from Vientiane to the northern town of Boten, and on the journey north stopping at Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang, Muang Xay and Nateuy, some 1,035

kilometres long to Kunming, and takes both passengers and freight. Work started in December 2016 and the railway was opened in December 2021 for the cross-border transportation of cargo. But, for a while, passenger traffic was confined to the domestic routes on either side of the border. Cross-border passenger services began on 13 April 2023 (Wikipedia, 2023b), and the LNTA was anticipating upwards of 370,000 inbound Chinese passengers in 2023. Tickets have to be purchased up to three days in advance and, in the early days of opening, these were sold out at the end of the first day.

Among many feature articles from Xinhua News Agency in 2023 on Lao PDR, another released on 17 November, and headed “Laos to achieve goal of tourist arrivals in 2023”, provides an even more promising picture (Xinhua, 2023b). It suggests that there is “a strong recovery” under way, and that in the first nine months of 2023, Lao PDR received around 2.4 million visitors and a further 400,000 to 800,000 were anticipated for the remaining months, bringing the total to somewhere around three million. *The Laotian Times* has also put a positive gloss on this news, though statistics of visitor arrivals tend to differ (2023), and in attempting to make sense of Lao PDR statistics it is notoriously difficult to arrive at reliable figures.

The planned Visit Laos Year 2024 has been anticipated to bring in around 4.6 million visitors worth about US\$ 712 million in receipts, though after over four years from 2019, pre-pandemic, it will still be a few hundred thousand below what was achieved then. An earlier projection for 2023 was 1.4 million visitors. Yet again the importance of the Laos-China Railway was emphasised as providing a gateway from China into the main tourist sites of Lao PDR, as well as the passage from Thailand over four “Friendship Bridges” across the Mekong, with the fifth planned to be finished in 2024, and the sixth by 2025, with a seventh being planned. These are an enormous boost to encourage Thai tourism to Lao PDR. They now connect various strategic points for tourism access from Thailand to Laos: the first bridge from Nong Khai Province to Vientiane Prefecture opened in 1994; the second, Mukdahan Province to Savannakhet Province operating from 2007; the third, from Nakhon Phanom Province to Thakhek, Khammouane Province opened in 2011; the fourth bridge from Chiang Khong District in Chiang Rai Province to Ban Houayxay, Bokeo Province, taking traffic from 2013; then there are two further bridges under way, the fifth from Bueng Kan Province to Pakxan Town, Bolikhamxai Province, expected to be opened by 2024, and the sixth bridge from Nan Tan District, Ubon Ratchathani Province to Nakhonpheng District, Saravan Province, hopefully to be completed by around 2025. There is even a further bridge planned and under discussion to connect Loei Province to Vientiane Prefecture. The Mekong forms the western

boundary between Thailand and Lao PDR and the number of available bridge crossings suggest that there will be an increasing flow of Thai tourists into Laos. The Mekong bridges are part of the strategy to increase Thai-Lao interaction (see, for example, Pakdeepinit et al., 2020). Taken together with the Laos-China Railway and the land-crossings from Vietnam and Cambodia, in addition to flights within the region and to East Asia (China, Japan, Republic of Korea), then the potential for Lao PDR as a centre for regional tourism is enhanced.

In addition, there are six official land crossings from Vietnam to Lao PDR, four of them are also established bus routes from Hue, Hanoi, Hoi An, Ho Chi Minh City, Nghe An and Da Nang to major Lao PDR cities and towns including Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang. These cross from Vietnam at Tay Tiong to Sop Hun, Cau Treo to Nam Phao, Lao Bao to Dansavanh and Nam Can to Nam Khan. A bus journey from Hanoi to Vientiane takes around 24 hours. The two further connections are between Ngoc Hi to Boy Y and Napao to Cha Lo. There is only one official crossing from Cambodia from Tropaeng Kreal to Nong Nok Khiene. Though two decades ago, Jonathan Rigg saw “land-locked” Lao PDR (2005), as a remote and forgotten land, perhaps the post-pandemic transition with an emphasis on domestic and regional tourism, will constitute something of a renaissance.

Recent Field Data

The pandemic that devastated the Lao economy and its tourist sector has still left its mark on Lao PDR. It is not a smooth and straightforward path to recovery. In a World Bank survey, it was found that 90% of family businesses had reopened or new ventures started, but income was lower than the pre-pandemic levels and inflation and rising prices for fuel and food meant that over half the households had reduced their expenditure on health, food consumption and education; 42% of households stated that their children had stopped attending classes temporarily or permanently, and 23% were experiencing severe food insecurity ([The]World Bank, 2022).

Vientiane

Vientiane, as the capital city, has a wide range of tourist attractions (Wikipedia, 2023c). There are beautifully placed, constructed and designed Buddhist temples, particularly one of the most important sacred and national symbols, Pha That Luang, a three-layered and gilded monument, dating from 1566, though renovated numerous times, and containing fine Buddha statues; it also serves as the site of a most important Lao ritual and celebration, Boun Pha That Luang, on the night of the full moon in November (or sometimes late October) with a large gathering

of monks from around the country, and processions between various important Buddhist temples and shrines, including Wat Si Saket with its 2,000 Buddhist sculptures, Wat Si Muang, Wat Ho Phra Kao, Wat Ong Teu, and Wat That Foon, among others; there are preserved expressions of French colonial architecture with the French passion for broad tree-lined boulevards, the most impressive and central being Avenue Lan[e] Xang, which is marked at a prominent position in downtown Vientiane by the Victory Gate, Patuxai (known by the French as Monument aux Morts), built between 1957 to 1968 and dedicated to Laotian soldiers who had lost their lives during the Second World War and the Lao struggle for independence against the French; although it is strikingly reminiscent of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, it is decorated in sculptures, designs and images which resonate with Lao culture.

There are many museums of interest in Vientiane, and important collections in Buddhist temples, but to capture the direction of the pre-revolutionary and post-1975 Lao PDR there is the Memorial Museum dedicated to President Kaysone Phomvihane, the first leader of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (1955-1992), and of an independent Lao PDR from 1975. His residence is now the site of the museum where he lived until his death in 1992. Interestingly, and which says much about the unfortunate American venture in Southeast Asia, knowing very little about its history, culture and politics, the site was the location of the USAID-CIA compound until 1975 with the departure of the USA, the defeat of the US-backed national government and the Royal Lao Army, and the abolition of the monarchy (Wikipedia, 2023d).

Vientiane is also located on the banks of the majestic Mekong River flowing southwards, through the heart of the city, with restaurants, bars and beer gardens strung out along the riverside. Apart from walking along the Mekong, Vientiane is an ideal place for strolling; it has The Walking Street, and a number of interesting markets, including the Chinese Night Market (Khua Din), and other night and morning markets.

One arresting and quite extraordinary tourist site is the Buddha Park ([Wat] Xieng Khuan, also a religious site), 25 kilometres from central Vientiane, the brain-child of the shaman-priest, Luang Phu [Venerable Grandfather] Bounleua Soullilat, who went into exile in Thailand following the Pathet Lao takeover in 1975. It contains a stunning array of over 200 Buddhist and Hindu sculptures made from reinforced concrete, including a magnificent reclining Buddha. Its founder brought together, in syncretic fashion, Buddhist and Hindu iconography, with sculptures of the Buddha, characters from Buddhist cosmology, Hindu

deities (Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma) and other gods, demons and animals, and prominent heroes and heroines from Lao history (Wikipedia, 2023e).

Though relatively busy, and the strand along the Mekong with its pleasure park was bustling in February-March 2023, with the increasing occurrence of Chinese and Thai tourist groups, following their guides and taking photographs, there was also post-pandemic evidence of boarded-up shops, restaurants and guesthouses and units for sale and vagrants begging for money and food at street corners and near prominent tourist sites. Yet there were also considerable signs of recovery with modern or renovated restaurants serving a range of local, Asian and Western food. The markets were full, especially along The Walking Street, and talking with some tourists, among them there were many local residents and Lao visitors from outside Vientiane, there for overnight stays, often with family and friends.

Vang Vieng

Field observations in Vang Vieng suggest that the site is rapidly reaching pre-pandemic levels. Most of the favoured accommodation for backpackers was taken during February-March 2023. One supposes that “The backpackers are back”, though it is obvious that they do not generate the tourism income that comes from high-end package tourists. Nevertheless, some are prepared to pay for adventure and sports: kayaking, air ballooning, biking (and see Bichler, 2009 on backpackers, 2009; Wikipedia, 2023f). The streets and hostels in early 2023 were teeming with young Caucasians, primarily from Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with smaller numbers from Japan, Republic of Korea, China and Taiwan. In the promotional literature at least, Lao PDR has begun to regain its reputation as a place to visit on backpacker trails through Southeast Asia. Harrison and Schipani raise the issue of the tension and dilemma for Lao PDR in pursuing a “pro-poor, community-based tourism development” and permitting low-end, budget backpackers into the country.

There are those in government and the tourism industry who “stress that higher spending regional and long-haul tourists, with an interest in nature and culture-based activities, will bring considerable benefits and yet have minimal negative impacts. At the same time, however, it is realized that the tourism facilities available in Lao PDR are more appropriate for low-spending, independent travellers, or ‘backpackers’, and this kind of visitor is also welcome, provided they respect local customs (2009: 183-184).

Nevertheless, whether high-end or backpacker the Lao government is prepared to set aside its officially strict ideological stance and allow neo-liberal tourism niches to operate in such places as Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang (Bichler, 2009). But sadly, based on our

observations, at times tourists do not acknowledge and pay respect to local customs, drunkenness in the streets, young women in inappropriate dress, high levels of noise and some aggressiveness fuelled by alcohol. Package tourists to Vang Vieng were mainly from China, Republic of Korea, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam. Korean tourists are increasingly attracted to Lao PDR. There were also appreciable numbers of domestic tourists travelling on the Laos-China Railway and by road between Vientiane, Vang Veng and Luang Prabang.

In our research, encounters that the tourists had with Lao PDR were generally positive. Lao PDR was a destination that both package tourists and backpackers-budget travellers sought. From discussions with a range of tourists in Vang Vieng we recorded such statements as “exciting”, “interesting”, “exotic”, “It is as I imagined Southeast Asia to be”; “It seems untouched by the outside world”. Backpackers we spoke to emphasised “adventure”, “parties”, “bars and restaurants” [in close proximity], “free local whisky” at some establishments, “reasonably-priced and comfortable accommodation in guesthouses and hostels”, “easy to reach countryside to visit rural communities”, “good quality souvenirs”. But the general view from most of the tourists is that it is good value rather than going to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore or Jakarta.

However, the local Lao authorities did act to crack down on some bars and party venues in Vang Vieng because of the noise, illegal drug-taking and drink-fuelled unsocial behaviour disrespectful of local residents. It is said that Vang Vieng is now a bit quieter and ordered, which this research supports, but still full of youthful energy. For the rather more sedate and older tourists, with interests in cultural sites, then Vang Vieng is not really appropriate and can be demanding: unless you happen to be eager to try out hot air ballooning, paramotoring, buggy driving, ziplining, kayaking and tubing down the Nam Song River, rock-climbing, hiking, caving, biking and motorbiking through the countryside and its striking limestone uplands (Wikipedia, 2023f). Most sites on the tourist circuit outside Vang Vieng are caves (Tham Chang/Jang Cave, Tham Phu Kham Cave, Patong Cave, Tham Nam [Water Cave], and stretches of enclosed water such as the Blue Lagoon, and dramatic viewpoints including Nam Xay).

Luang Prabang

A city, referred to as a “town” by UNESCO, of 430,000 inhabitants, situated on a peninsula between the conjoining of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers, it is the most internationally-known tourist site in Lao PDR, primarily because of its status as a World Heritage Site (WHS). It was inscribed on the World Heritage list on 9 December 1995 (World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, 2023; Wikipedia, 2023g). In the first nine months of 2023, it is estimated that around 780,000 tourists visited Luang Prabang. Of these approximately 178,000 were domestic tourists, expressing the importance of the city as a national religious site for pilgrimage and obeisance; it has some 33 temples in the heritage area, 16 of them are of particular importance, with the mix and, in some cases, the hybridisation of Lao, Thai and Khmer styles (Tourism Laos, 2023; Valente, 2020).

Vientiane is the most visited site in Lao PDR, but as the capital and a major gateway to the country, it is to be expected that a significant proportion of around three million visitors in 2023 would pass through Vientiane on their way to other destinations or arrive there from other tourist sites having crossed land borders.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site website for Luang Prabang (2023) provides us with the main reason for its inscription and the recognition of its special importance as a site which embodies “outstanding universal values”, and one which obviously attracts tourists. It is “exceptional for its rich architectural and artistic heritage that reflects the fusion of Lao traditional urban architecture with that of the colonial era”; and provides “a remarkably well-preserved townscape”; its architectural and artistic heritage and the harmonious juxtaposition of Lao traditional urban structures and temples, and French colonial buildings have rendered it of enormous significance for humankind. Though it had a complex and chequered history, with certain breaks in political continuity when the political centre moved to Vientiane, it was the royal capital of early city states and kingdoms in northern Laos.

After the French annexation of Laos following the Franco-Siamese war of 1893 when Luang Prabang was released from its vassal status with the Kingdom of Siam, and then became a French protectorate, Prince Khao succeeded his father as King Sisavang Vong in March 1905. His father, Kham Souk (Zakarine) reigned from 1895 to 1903 (Wikipedia, 2023h, 2023i). Sisavang’s residence was at the Royal Palace (Haw Kham, or

Golden Hall), built by the French from 1904, and now the Royal Palace Museum. Under the protectorate Sisavang Vong reigned, and was supportive of French administration, until the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945, when he was deposed for a brief period by the Lao nationalists (Lao Issara), and then reinstated in 1946 as King of a united Laos on the French re-occupation in April 1946. He served as monarch until his death in 1959 to be succeeded by his son Sisavang Vatthana, who was eventually deposed and sent, with his family, to a re-education camp, following the Pathet Lao government's abolition of the constitutional monarchy in 1975.

Yet though not always the political centre of Laos, Luang Prabang was always its religious centre, even in the post-1975 revolutionary period. It emerged as an important politico-religious centre, known early on as Muang Sua, during the formation of the Mon city states of Dvaravati from the 6th to 8th centuries. Subsequently it assumed the status of the capital of the kingdom of Lan Xang, known as Maung Xieng Doung Xieng Thong. Under its first king, Chao Fa Ngum in 1353, the son-in-law of the Khmer king at Angkor, Luang Prabang bore the name Xieng Thong, which was then changed to Luang Phra Bang, on the Khmer gift of a standing Buddha image (Phra Bang, Royal Buddha Image) now located in the Royal Palace grounds and considered to be the most sacred and culturally significant Buddha image in Laos (Wikipedia, 2023j, 2023k).

Luang Prabang, so popular during the pre-pandemic era when it was said to be suffering from “over-tourism”, was compared with the high-pressure Southeast Asian tourism sites of Hoi An in Vietnam and Ubud in Bali. It would appear that it is recovering its tourism position, and may again be subject to increasingly intensive tourist interest. Yet, at the moment it seems to be coping, and there are quiet back streets in the vicinity of the riverside road, Khem Khong, which the sightseer can stroll along, with magnificent views of the Mekong and the Nam Khan.

Talking with tourists from a range of countries, we received these comments, “I have never seen so many temples in such a beautiful Lao-French setting”, “After two days I am ‘temped-out””, “This is a wonderful and tranquil place, I really want to come back”, “The riverside walk is magnificent”, “I love the Lao food here”, “I feel that I am part of Lao history when I wander through the streets lined with temples”, “I spent five days here and every night I went to the night-market, great food and so busy and exciting”, “I can see why it has World Heritage Site status, most places of interest are in

walking distance, and in almost every street and lane we walked along there was something to see”; “It is an architectural wonder”. Luang Prabang is certainly a place to wander through, particularly to visit the temples on the roads of Sakkaline, Sisavangvong, Sisavang Vatthana, Phomathat, Kingkitsrathath and Kounxoua and to visit the steeply-sided 150-kilometre-high Mount Phou Si which overlooks the Mekong and the old town, dominated by the temple, Wat Chom Si.

The most sacred and significant temple in Luang Prabang is Wat Xieng Thong built by King Setthathirath in 1559-1560. (Wikipedia, 2023l). What is most striking about Luang Prabang, given that it is a one-party, secular, socialist-communist state is the active presence of Buddhism in the numerous temples and monasteries and the presence of monks and novices, and the religious schools and training that they sustain. Of course, this is a tourist attraction, but it also speaks to the long-established religious culture of the Lao. This is balanced with the commercial side of Lao life; again, major tourist attractions are the street markets, particularly the Night Market at the junction between Sisavangvong and Setthsthilat Roads, and the Morning Market, again in the same vicinity, off the Sisavangvong Road. During our visit these markets were always busy with tourists and local residents.

Concluding Remarks

During the pandemic there was extreme pessimism about the future of tourism, not only in Lao PDR. Vaccinations had not yet come onstream, and when they did a significant number of countries, particularly in the developing world found it difficult to access the necessary supplies of vaccine. The likelihood was that the tourism industry would never be the same again; it would experience a transition to something else, and there would be a long period of recovery. But this has not happened, or it has not happened to the extent that was predicted (see Kim and King, 2020a, 2020b; King, 2021). In the case of Lao PDR there has been a degree of continuity from the pre-pandemic period in 2019. The same source-countries of inbound visitors have more or less remained the same (China, Thailand, Vietnam, Republic of Korea, Japan, Taiwan, with smaller numbers from other ASEAN member-states and from Australia, New Zealand, Europe, the USA and Canada). Considerable numbers of backpackers have returned to Vang Vieng, and along with Vientiane and Luang Prabang and a few other sites, the major tourist preoccupations have remained the same.

There is, however, a difference in that the emphasis on the regional and domestic market has become more pronounced and Lao PDR with a central geographical position in mainland Southeast Asia and its cross-border land connections with its nearest neighbours, as well as the increasing number of flights to other Asian countries, particularly China, the Republic of Korea and Japan, suggest that it is well-placed to take advantage of this re-orientation of markets in government and tourism industry policies and strategies. In spite of the pre-pandemic anxieties of focussing on particular markets rather than diversifying, and the reliance on mass tourism rather than a more selective and higher-end tourist clientele, it is mass-tourism and backpackers that countries like Lao PDR, in desperate need of foreign exchange to make up for the substantial loss of revenue during the pandemic, have continued to pursue. Lao PDR has also retained its concentration on nature-based eco-tourism and its cultural assets.

The tendency both in Lao PDR government policy and planning documents, and in reports and recommendations from international aid organisations and funding bodies and NGOs in relation to Lao PDR is to encourage sustainable tourism; the support of communities through pro-poor and community-based tourism and provision and contingency funds for tourism businesses and workers, including appropriate and enforceable labour laws and protection; the greater use of digital platforms and tools to increase market intelligence, promotion, coordination, integration, and sharing knowledge; training and upgrading skills to produce a more educated and flexible workforce; these pronouncements seem to be more to do with playing to funders, support agents, human rights bodies and those concerned with climate change, rather than a realistic appraisal of what is feasible and capable of implementation. When a country like Lao PDR, in desperate pursuit of tourist dollars, sets its mind on increasing its foreign exchange revenue, then the noble visions of sustainability and the protection of the environment, and support of local residents and workers in a pro-poor agenda, seem to be rather distant, nevertheless admirable goals. Yet, there is still room for optimism in the tourism industry in Lao PDR and its ability to rescue itself from what was the devastating impact of Covid-19.

Note

The paper is based on a detailed survey of the primary and secondary literature, and, in an editing capacity, exchanging information and ideas and reading the work of (the late) David Harrison, Annabel Vallard, Sigrid Lenaerts, Jonathan Rigg and Steven Schipani. My first encounter with Laos was in talking with a fellow doctoral student at Hull University in the 1970s (Barber, 1979). A visit to Lao PDR in February-March 2023 also involved informal discussions with 45 international tourists (10 from Thailand and 3 from China (through interpreters) and 32 from a range of Western countries [USA, UK, France, Canada, Germany] and Australia and New Zealand. Interviews were also undertaken with five owners/managers of small-scale tourism enterprises, and there was extensive walking and photographing around major tourism sites. My main organising agent was the Laos-China Railway and the focus on Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang, with journeys to some of the outlying tourist sites around Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

Postscript

The Lao PDR tourism industry is volatile, dependent, as it is, on tourists continuing to visit from the main markets of Thailand, China, Vietnam, Japan and South Korea. Nevertheless, the conclusion from a recent World Bank Report (2024) gives room for optimism:

In 2024 the Government of the Lao PDR launches Visit Laos Year, which it hopes will attract at least 4.6 million tourists to the country. This represents a significant economic opportunity; tourism already accounts for about 5 percent of the country's gross domestic product, which the World Bank estimates can grow to about 10 percent with the right investments and reforms.

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