



INTERPRETING YOUR LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

A training manual for women and men local tour guides in Lao PDR



Paul Eshoo & Phongsith Davading

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For more information about community-based tourism in Lao PDR visit www.ecotourismlaos.com.





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Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the most important sources of income for the Lao PDR. In fact, tourism has been the number one earner of foreign exchange in Laos over the past few years, leading agriculture, garments, minerals and mines, and timber. One of the top priorities of the Lao government is to alleviate poverty, and a new strategy for doing this is to use tourism as a tool to generate income for rural people. The idea is simple: to transfer some of the income and benefits generated by the tourism industry to those in need, in this case, rural villagers.

The question is, however, *how* do we use tourism to alleviate poverty? Unlike agriculture, for example, which produces *goods* such as tons of rice, kilos of fruit, or bushels of corn, tourism is a sector that provides *services*. Tourism services include such things as food preparation, accommodation, transportation, and tour guiding. In order to determine how we can use tourism to alleviate rural poverty, we must first think about what services villagers can provide to tourists; by providing a service to tourists, villagers can then earn income.

Tourists come to Lao PDR to see something new and different, something that they have never seen or experienced before in their own countries. They come in search of new knowledge, a new understanding and a new view of the world around them. They are interested in learning about traditional livelihoods and how Lao people live. They also want to learn about ethnic religions, traditional agricultural systems, local crafts, Lao music and performance, wildlife and nature, and local uses of plants and forests. Laos' unique cultural, natural and historical heritage is what distinguishes it from all other countries in the world and is, therefore, the main attraction for tourists.

So who better to teach tourists about cultural, natural and historical heritage than local Lao people themselves? Much of the knowledge required to interpret these attractions is often not written in books and is not a part of the modern educational system, but is derived from local culture and ethnic heritage, which is passed down orally from generation to generation. Thus, there is a great opportunity for Lao villagers to use their local knowledge as tour guides, which can create an important source of income for rural people. Empowering local people to be guides can also yield the positive benefits of conservation and protection of these precious resources.

The objective of this book is to teach local villagers how to use local knowledge while providing guide services to tourists. This book is written for both female and male guides, as the knowledge of each are equally important and interesting to tourists. This book will provide guides with real examples of local knowledge and useful tools for interpreting them. By reading this book and completing its exercises, guides will become more confident and competent interpreters of local knowledge while guiding.

Finally, although this book will be useful for tourism managers, professional tour guides and researchers, it is mainly written for village-based tour guides. The book is written in a simple, straightforward language that is meant to speak directly to villagers. It has also been translated and published in Lao following the same format as this English version.





Chapter 1

Introduction to Local Knowledge & Its Value as a Tourism Resource

What is local knowledge ?

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) has been defined as "*local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. It is the basis for local-level decision-making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural resource management and a host of other activities in rural communities.*"¹ It "*refers to the large body of knowledge that has been developed outside the formal educational system.*"² And "*It is the knowledge that people in a given community have developed over time, and continue to develop.*"³

UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization) summarizes the key aspects of IK as follows⁴:

- Locally bound, indigenous to a specific area
- Culture- and context-specific
- Non-formal knowledge
- Orally transmitted, and generally not documented.
- Dynamic and adaptive
- Holistic in nature
- Closely related to survival and subsistence for many people worldwide.

IK is the knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter, from father to son. IK is not what students learn in school. It is what they learn from their parents and elders. It is information unique to an ethnic group or rural community relating to many subjects that are an integral part of their culture and livelihoods. It is the non-written information that villagers throughout the Lao PDR rely on to plant and harvest crops; to find appropriate locations for settling their village; to perform religious ceremonies; to educate their children; to prepare local food dishes; to care for their sick; to manage their forests and rivers; and many other activities that are necessary for survival or to maintain the integrity of their culture.

Do you go to school to learn how to plant rice? Do you go to school to learn how to perform a marriage ceremony? Do you go to school to learn about how to find medicinal plants in the forest? Do you go to school to learn how to build a traditional house? If you are a villager in Lao PDR, you will probably answer "no" to all of these questions. Those who answer "no" to these questions probably have indigenous knowledge about these subjects.



Most people in Laos learn how to plant rice from their parents, not in school.

¹ See Flavier et al. 1995:479

²World Bank website text. See: www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/index.htm

³ See IIRR, Philippines, 1996. 'Recording and using indigenous knowledge: a manual'.

⁴ UNESCO website text: See http://www.unesco.org/most/bpindi.htm#_ftnref1

An important characteristic of indigenous knowledge is that it is often different for different groups of people and cultures. For example, many ethnic groups in Laos uses different techniques to plant and harvest rice; they each practice different religious ceremonies; they use different medicinal plants; and they produce different crafts and products. With more than forty-nine distinct ethnic groups Laos' indigenous resources are very rich and diverse indeed. In comparison, IK in countries such as Europe or America is not quite as developed as their cultures are more modern and new, lots of indigenous knowledge has been lost.



Knowledge on how to many produce local products are passed down from mother to daughter, such as the production of these Tai Lue rice noodles.

In this book we are concerned with something broader than "indigenous knowledge". We are interested in the knowledge of all people and ethnic groups of the Lao PDR, regardless of whether they are the original or indigenous group of Laos. Instead of using the term "indigenous knowledge" we will use the term "local knowledge" (LK) to indicate the knowledge of all Lao people and all ethnic groups.



Exercise #1

Name three activities that you learned to do outside of school. Choose from the topics of agriculture, animal husbandry, crafts, and forest products. Is your knowledge about these activities unique to your village or ethnic group? Why or why not? Is it *local knowledge*?

Why is local knowledge important?

LK is very important to Lao PDR and to the world. The information learned in schools and from books is not complete. LK is knowledge that has been developed over a long period of time, over hundreds and even thousands of years. As the cultures that have developed LK are often older than the institutions of universities and modern governments, LK can perhaps hold more wisdom and lessons than what modern science and logic may provide. It is important that this information not be lost.

There is a growing concern that the forces of the modern world television, modern agriculture, and modern society to name a few will change rural communities and ethnic groups in such a way that will cause a loss of IK. But would this be wise? Would it be wise to lose hundreds of years of experience and knowledge developed over multitudes of generations? Is there some information that local people might have that is vital to the health and survival of all people around the world? Many people believe that IK is very important and should not be lost, but should rather be supported and considered by scientists, academics, politicians and communities in making decisions.



There are many useful local medicinal plants in Laos, such as this plant which stops bleeding.



Some people believe that ‘old is bad and new is good.’ But if we put our beliefs into one set of ideas or body of knowledge modern ideas what will we do if we find out later that that this new knowledge is not correct or not complete. By having many sources of knowledge to choose from, including the ‘old’ knowledge of ethnic and rural communities, we may more easily find the answers that we need. For example, most of the modern medicines found in pharmacies are derived from natural plants taken from the wild. In the future, we may find the cures to new illnesses by using local knowledge of local medicinal plants. But how will we find these cures if we lose this knowledge?

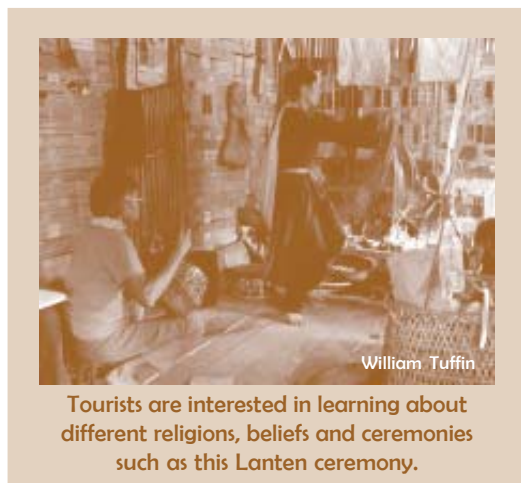
Why is local knowledge important to tourism in the Lao PDR ?

We can see how LK is useful to local people, but we must ask ourselves how is LK useful and important to *tourism*? Isn't LK about agriculture, religion, medicine, and other things necessary for survival? Tourists have money and can eat in restaurants. They can go to hospitals for health problems. They practice their own religion, and they have their own lifestyle. So why would a tourist be interested in local knowledge?

Tourists are very interested in indigenous knowledge because it is the very thing that makes Laos' interesting and different from other countries. For example, foreign tourists might be interested in Lao traditional agricultural systems to learn about how food is produced. Most tourists have eaten rice but they have never seen how it is grown. This may seem simple and common to Lao people, but to foreigners it is fascinating.



Lao agriculture is interesting to tourists. Tourists are interested in learning how to plant rice.



William Tuffin

Tourists are interested in learning about different religions, beliefs and ceremonies such as this Lanten ceremony.

They also might want to learn about local religions because they are curious about different belief systems. Tourists ask themselves questions such as: how are ethnic religions different from mine? How do they celebrate festivals? What ceremonies do they do when people are sick? One of the best ways to get this information is by visiting Lao people, asking them questions and making comparisons.

Many tourists also believe that some of the local knowledge in Laos can be useful to their own lives. For example, there are many herbal medicines in Laos that may be more beneficial than some of medicines available in modern pharmacies and clinics. Tourists come to learn about these medicines and to hear your local knowledge about them.



Exercise #2

Name two things that you normally do in or around your village that you think would be interesting or fun for tourists to learn to do.

Who has local knowledge?

Is it only old people that have important local knowledge? While it is true that old people have a lot of local knowledge, we need to understand that this knowledge must continue to be passed down to the younger generation. Young people can have important local knowledge as well. There are many types of local knowledge used by both young and old people in everyday life such as techniques for farming, fishing, cooking and other daily tasks.

Is it only men who have local knowledge? Both men and women have local knowledge. There are many activities that women are responsible for that men are not, and *vice versa*. For example, in many villages in Laos women often know more about silk weaving than men, while men are often more knowledgeable about basket weaving. The knowledge that women know about planting crops and gardens, raising livestock, raising children, producing handicrafts, cooking, collecting forest products and many other activities is very important and very interesting for tourists.



Women have very important local knowledge, such as this silk weaver.



Men also have important local knowledge such as this basket weaver.

Is the local knowledge of one ethnic group better than the local knowledge of another? The local knowledge of each ethnic group is equally important. This is especially true to tourists who are interested in learning about the differences of each ethnic group. One of the most important tourist attractions of the Lao PDR is its ethnic diversity. It is therefore important that we teach tourists about the differences between each ethnic group. If we tell tourists that each ethnic group is the same, then tourists will not find Laos very interesting and will likely not visit any place outside of Vientiane or Luang Prabang. If we can explain to tourists about each unique characteristic of each ethnic group in Laos, then tourists will have a lot to see and learn and will stay in Laos for a long time.

In short, we must understand that all ethnic groups and all people with local knowledge young, old, men and women are important and interesting to tourists because it is our differences that attract tourists to visit Laos.



Souksan Pakasy

The differences between ethnic groups is interesting to tourists.



Exercise #3

Make a list of some common tasks that women do in your village. Make a separate list of common tasks that men do. From the two lists select which activities you think might be interesting to tourists and determine if men, women or both should be responsible for teaching these activities to tourists.



Who can be a guide and who can teach local knowledge to tourists?

Any local person who has local knowledge about nature and wildlife, culture, religion, history, and traditional livelihoods including agriculture, forest products, cooking and crafts, and who is interested in explaining or showing this information to tourists can be a local tour guide. To be a local tour guide you must be proud of your culture and local knowledge, and you must be motivated to give this information to outsiders. You must not be shy and must not be afraid that your knowledge and culture is not good enough for tourists. It is.

Is it necessary to speak English or another foreign language such as French or Japanese to be a tour guide? It is true that speaking a foreign language will improve the value of your guide services and will indeed make communication with foreign tourists more enjoyable. However, you can still be a local guide even if you do not speak a foreign language. You can do this in two ways. (1) You can use the assistance of a foreign language-speaking guide to help translate for you. (2) You can use hand signals and demonstrations to explain your knowledge, and you can do activities with them to teach them about traditional livelihoods. (We will learn more about this in the Chapter 3).

Can women be guides, too? Some people believe that only men can be tour guides because only men are strong enough to carry a backpack, only men can walk long distances and only men have the information that tourists need. All of these ideas are false. Women typically carry very heavy items every day, including baskets of rice and wood, buckets of water and children. Women typically walk very long distances; they walk as far as the men, going to the fields everyday, walking to the market and back, and walking to the forest to collect plants and fruits. The knowledge of men and women is also equally interesting to tourists. In fact, women have a lot of information that men do not. For example, women know more about making certain kinds of crafts, they know more about raising children, and they know more about certain aspects of agriculture. Approximately half of all tourists who visit Laos are women. Thus, we can assume that at least half of all tourists who visit Laos are interested in learning about the lives of Lao women and want to learn directly from Lao women themselves. It is, therefore, equally important to include women, as well as men, as tour guides and local knowledge interpreters.

Nang Chan Kham is a local guide in Luang Namtha Province. She grew up in a small Khmu village, Ban Sop Sim, in the rural countryside of Luang Namtha, helping her family to plant rice and other crops, take care of her siblings and perform other activities around the village. When she started guiding she could not speak any English, but was able to interpret her personal understanding of Khmu culture as a local guide interpreter through the help of an English-speaking tour guide. Ms. Kham can now speak conversational English after a couple years of leading trips, and enjoys guiding because she “gets that opportunity to meet new people, learn new things from the tourists, and share her knowledge with them.”



Bianca Spence

**Nang Chan Kham,
a local Khmu guide.**

Is all local knowledge appropriate for tourism?

Tourists are interested to learn about many different types of local knowledge. This book will provide you with only *some* examples of local knowledge that tourists are interested in. There are many other examples that are not included in this book. It is up to you, the local guide, to provide the tourists with as many different examples local knowledge as possible. There are no limits to what might be interesting to the tourists and unique to your area and culture.

It is important, however, to understand that you are *not obliged* to tell or show tourists things about your life or culture that are culturally sensitive or that might be inappropriate for them to see, know or do. For example, there may be certain places in your house or village that may be off limits to visitors. In such a case you would not take them there and instead explain why. Or there may be certain ceremonies that only villagers are allowed to attend, in which case you would explain to the tourists that the ceremony is off limits. It is up to you, the guide and representative of your community and culture, to determine what is and what is not appropriate for tourists to see, hear or do in your village.



Exercise #4

Make a list of some of the common taboos in your village. Can you think of any activities that you would not want tourists to participate in or any information that you would not want to explain to the tourists?





Chapter 2

Examples of Local Knowledge and How It Can Be Used in Tourism

This chapter provides some examples of real local knowledge in Lao PDR that is used in tourism by guides and local people. These examples are not a complete list of local knowledge or a complete list of what you can show or explain to tourists. There are many more examples that we hope *you* will provide to the tourists when they go on a tour with you or visit your village. This chapter will give you some real ideas of what types of knowledge you might be able to show while guiding. It is your job to come up with your own examples and explain your own, unique knowledge to your guests.

Explaining an area or a place

When leading a group of tourists in your area it is important to explain some of the local features, including stories, history, and any other facts that you may know about the place. There is no limit to what type of information might be interesting to a tourist. The main thing is that you give information that is not obvious to the eye. For example, if you point to a rock and say "This rock looks like an elephant", the tourist will only be mildly interested because he can see it with his own eyes. If, however, you tell the story of the rock and explain that "villagers believe that it used to be a giant elephant that roamed the area hundreds of years ago...", the tourists will be quite happy because they learned something new and different.

Example: History of a village

Many villages in Laos move to a new location for various reasons, including agricultural needs, natural disasters, war, and population pressures. It is important to explain to tourists not only *when* the village moved, but more importantly *why* the village moved.

Two local guides in Muang Sing, Luang Namtha Province explain the history of an Akha Pouli Ngai village, Ban Lao Kao, located on their one-day forest trek. After reaching the site of the old village, located atop a mountain above the new village, they explain as follows.



Two local guides explaining the history of the old village on site.

“Many years ago, this village was located near Nam Daeng a few kilometers away from here. Legend says that an epidemic broke out in the village after a burial ceremony was improperly performed. Of the fifty or more families that inhabited the original village, only ten survived. They moved here to the top of this mountain to escape the epidemic. The villagers lived in this location for many years. Then, about fourteen years ago, there was a fire in the village. Some villagers resettled to other nearby villages. The remaining villagers moved to the lowlands, the site of the present day village. They chose the new site due to its close proximity to rice paddy fields. This move has made their daily lives more convenient and productive because they now plant rice paddies instead of upland rice and do not have to walk far to get to their fields.”



Exercise #5

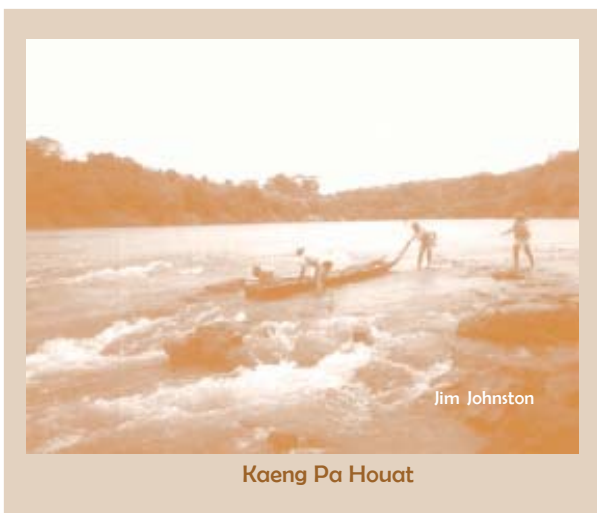
Write a short history of your village. Explain not only *when* and *where* your village came from, but *why* your village settled in its current location.

Example: Kaeng Pa Houat

Some places are named after events that happened there. Along the Xe Banghiang River in Savannakhet Province there is a set of rapids called Kaeng Pa’huat. The local people say that the rapids were given this name because many years ago, when some villagers went fishing in the area, they hid some sticky rice amongst the rocks of the rapid. The rocks were clean, dry, and the right size to hide (*Pa vai*) a steaming basket (*Huat*) full of rice from the view of birds, which might come to eat the rice. The problem arose, however, when they realized that they had hidden the rice so well that they had forgotten where to look for it. The villagers remember that day because they did not eat. Ever since then, the rapids have been given the name Kaeng Pa’huat (The Rapids Where the Rice Steaming Basket Was Hidden).

Nowadays, when tourists are riding down the river, they get out of the boats here so that the boatmen can safely guide the boats down the rapids. Of course, when the tourists get out of the boats, they often take their bags with them and place them amongst the rocks so that their

belongings will not get wet while the boats are hauled through the rapids. Here, there is a danger that the tourists may forget to put their bags back into the boat once it is through the rapids.



Kaeng Pa Houat

This is when a guide should tell the story about forgetting the *huat* of rice, and then can remind the tourists not to make the same mistake as the local people by leaving any of their bags or belongings behind in the rocks. The guide can also jokingly complete the story by adding, for example, that “if Mr John (one of the tourists), was to accidentally leave his camera behind on the rocks, the local people may have to change the name of the rapids to Kaeng Pa’kongthaihoob Thanh John.





Can you think of a story about a place nearby your village? Write or tell the story to your class.

Exercise #6

A note about providing an orientation to tourists before entering an area

In order to minimize cultural misunderstandings, it is important to provide tourists with a short orientation or introduction to local do's and don'ts before leaving on your tour and before entering certain places, such as sacred areas and villages. For example, before entering an Akha village, the guide should explain that it is taboo to touch the spirit gate; that no meat is allowed to be carried into the village; and that you should not carry your shoes while entering the village. The tourists will not know this information unless you tell them. This information is not limited to Akha villages. There are many places and villages that have different taboos and do's and don'ts that the tourists should be told before entering.



Kees Sprengers

Before entering this cave in Vieng Phoukha, local guides explain not to use candles, to stay with the group, not to smoke inside and to make an offering to the cave spirit.



What taboos will you explain to tourists before they enter your village? Make a list of the main things that you will tell a tourist before taking them into your village.

Exercise #7

Houses

Houses in Laos are quite different and unique from houses in many other countries. Their methods of construction are unique as well. You can explain, for example, what features of your house are different from the houses of other ethnic groups in Laos. You might explain how to build a house or how to build a roof (most tourists have never seen how a thatched roof is built). And you could even explain how a house is moved (in most foreign countries houses are never moved). There are many possibilities.

Example: Building techniques for protection against insects

The villagers of Ban Kone village, a predominantly Tai Yuan village located in Luang Namtha district, traditionally build their houses using bamboo for the walls and wood for the frame and posts. They build their houses above ground, a typical construction design used throughout Laos to provide a place for storage below, shade during the hot months and protection from floods. As the houses are made from natural materials, they are susceptible to damage from different kinds of insects.



Woven bamboo house wall

To protect the bamboo walls from being eaten by an insect known as *Meng Mot*, the villagers say that there are three things that need to be done. First, the bamboo for the house's walls must be cut during the cool months of the year, ideally November through February. The bamboo should also be taken from the forest, rather than from a bamboo grove growing in or nearby the village. Lastly, after being cut, the bamboo should be soaked in water for ten days, before being dried and used to weave the wall or roof panels. Should the bamboo be cut in the hot or rainy season; come from a stand of bamboo located inside the village; or not be soaked in water before being used, the bamboo will likely harbor the *Meng Mot* and be eaten rapidly after being constructed.

Another common pest that attacks houses in Luang Namtha, as well as in many other parts of Laos, is the termite. The villagers explain that termites must be able to make a tunnel from their nest in the ground on up through the wood that they want to eat. If they cannot make an uninterrupted tunnel from the ground to their desired feasting location, then they may choose to go to another location. Villagers have learned that by raising the house onto rocks, termites are less likely to eat through the wood of the house, as they cannot make a trail through the rock. While making this explanation, the villagers point to the rocks located under the wooden pillars of the house.



Natural protection against termites



Exercise #8

List the steps that you use to replace a traditional, thatch roof.

Health

In Laos there are many herbal medicines and traditional remedies for curing sicknesses. Most tourists know nothing of these traditional medicines and remedies and are very interested in learning about them. Some tourists believe that modern medicine is not comprehensive and that the use of traditional medicines can be beneficial. Hence, many tourists will be interested in your knowledge about local medicines and cures.





Example: Post-childbirth practices



Ms. Peng and her family

There are many different traditional practices and remedies in Laos that are believed to protect women’s and children’s health after childbirth. In many countries, however, people have lost their indigenous knowledge related to this subject and, now, rely solely on the use of modern medicines and hospitals. Many foreigners are very interested in learning about traditional post-childbirth health practices because they hold important lessons and advice that can be of use to all cultures and people.

The Khamu and the Tai Lue are two ethnic groups in Vieng Phoukha District, Luang Namtha Province which have unique traditions related to post-childbirth health. Ms. Peng Taviwan, a Tai Lue villager, and Mr. Si Kham, a local guide, compare the differences between the taboos and practices performed after childbirth by each of their respective ethnic groups.

Comparison of traditional post-childbirth health practices and taboos

<i>First three days after childbirth</i>	
Khamu	Tai Lue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mother and father are not allowed to eat any meat. They are allowed to eat only rice, salt and water. • The husband may help his wife with cooking and other household chores. Other female relatives, such as the woman’s mother, will also help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mother is not allowed to eat any meat except chicken meat (but not white chickens). The father is allowed to eat meat. • On the first day, only female relatives are allowed to visit the mother and help to prepare food.
<i>Period of rest (Kam Deuan)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Period of inactivity is counted according to the Khamu week, which is ten days (not seven). • Both the mother and the father must be inactive during this time. • Inactivity periods are made in three sets, each lasting ten days, for a total of thirty days. Between each of the 10-day periods, the man is allowed to go out to collect and stock food for the upcoming period of inactivity. • During this period the father must not pound nails or do hard labour around the house. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The period of activity is usually about one month for a woman’s first child and may last only about three weeks or less for a woman’s second child. • Only the mother must remain inactive during this period. • The man is allowed to perform hard labour activities such as building things around the house.

<i>Mother's health</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The woman must bathe with hot water at least eight times per day. She may not work and must relax. She must drink lots of boiled water, perhaps 2-8 litres per day. • If the mother cannot produce milk, a special root is boiled with the water and she is encouraged to eat more rice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bed is made especially for the mother. A dish with hot coals is kept beneath the bed to warm the mother's backside. She must lie down and rest all day and night. She must also drink lots of boiled water and take hot baths.
<i>Preparing food</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mother will have her own cooking area, pots, cooking and eating utensils. She will cook her own rice and food. • Other food, especially meat, must not be prepared inside the house near the mother. A separate cooking area will be made away from the mother's area for the father and family to cook with. • The mother will prepare her own food. • Other relatives may come and help, especially for boiling water. The husband will help, too, especially if there are no relatives to help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (same) The mother will have her own cooking area, pots, cooking and eating utensils. She will cook her own rice and food. • (same) Other food, especially meat, must not be prepared inside the house near the mother. A separate cooking area will be made away from the mother's area for the father and family to cook. • The mother will prepare her own food. • Other relatives may come and help, especially for boiling water.
<i>Taboos about eating meat</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditionally: the mother is not allowed to eat any meat of a cow, buffalo, pig, dog or goat until her child is able to say the name of the animal. This means that the mother did not eat the meat of any of these animals until after two to three years of giving birth to her child. • Nowadays: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Chickens (except white ones) can be eaten after three days of giving birth ○ Buffalo and pigs can be eaten six months after giving birth, unless the woman is not healthy, in which case she must wait one year. (White buffaloes cannot be eaten) ○ Cows, dogs and goats can be eaten three years after giving birth. ○ Female animals are not allowed to be eaten during the taboo period. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mother is not allowed to eat wild pig and cow until one month after the child is born. She cannot eat goat, dog or white buffalo until six months after the child is born. • After having her first child, if the woman's health is strong, she will be able to eat any meat for the birth of her second child.



<i>Ceremonies</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No ceremony is held before or after the period of inactivity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A <i>baci</i> ceremony is held after the mother finishes her period of inactivity.

For the tourist there are many lessons to learn from these traditions, which the guide might explain as follows: "After childbirth a woman must rest for an extended period of time, without work. She must drink lots of warm liquids, which must be boiled (killing bacteria and facilitate the production of breast milk). The mother must stay warm, either by taking many hot baths or from the hot coals placed underneath the bed. The father must help out as much as he can. The meat of animals, which typically carry lots of bacteria and diseases, must be kept away from the mother and her newborn by restricting them from the area where the mother rests and/or from her diet."



Exercise #9

Are there special taboos or practices related to post-childbirth in your village or culture? Do you give any special herbal medicines to the mother or child after birth? Explain.

Example:

Hmong medicine

Ms. Nang Yee of Ban Ta Louang, a Hmong village in Vieng Phoukha district, is a spirit doctor. Although most spirit doctors are men, a few are women. The villagers explain that it does not require formal training to become a spirit doctor, but rather requires that the spirit comes to you. In effect, spirit doctors are chosen by the spirits. It was eight years ago when Nang Yee first realized that something was different. She had different feelings and strange occurrences. She consulted a local spirit doctor in the village who, after various ceremonies and tests, determined that she had the ability to harness the power of the spirits.

Ms. Nang Yee now uses this power to help cure other people in the village. When someone is sick, they will consult her and ask her to call on the spirits to help diagnose their problem. The patient must first give Ms. Yee three sticks of incense, which are lit and placed on her altar. Then she begins her ceremony to call on the spirits. She will ask the spirits a question about the illness. For example, she might ask if the patient has done something wrong to the house spirit, or if he did something that disturbed the forest spirits.



Ms. Nang Yee and her husband.



After asking the question, she uses two halves of a sacred bull horn to find the answer. The bull horn pieces are tossed on the ground. If the pieces land on opposite sides three times in a row and a fourth time on even sides, then the answer to her question is “yes”. Otherwise the answer is “no”, and she repeats the process again with a new question. If it is determined, for example, that the patient’s mother and father spirits are not happy, then the spirit doctor will recommend that the patient sacrifice a cow, which is done at a later date by the spirit doctor. If on the other hand, after repeated questions no answer is found at all, it is said that the spirits have lied. For certain illnesses that are more serious or determined incurable by the spirit doctor, the sick or injured person will seek the help of modern medicine.



Exercise #10

Are there any traditional rituals or practices used in your village to cure illnesses? Explain.



Agriculture & livestock

Many tourists live in cities and have never seen where their food comes from. A few tourists who come from rural areas have experience farming but have never seen how Lao people plant and collect their food. Laos has many different varieties of fruits and vegetables that are not found in other parts of the world. For these reasons, many tourists are very interested in local knowledge about agriculture. Tourists want to learn how to plant crops; they want to learn about the different things that local people eat; and they want to learn where food comes from. A lot of this information is very common knowledge for Lao people, yet it is special and new for tourists. Always explain to the tourists what you see in the fields, even if it seems common you will find that most tourists are interested in even your most basic agricultural knowledge.

Example: How to plant rice

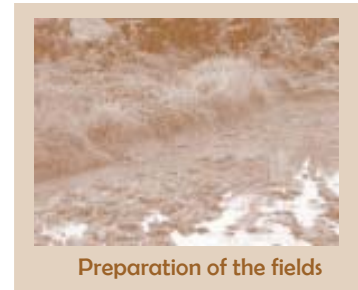
Mr. Bouakhet, a local guide with the Luang Namtha Guide Service, plants rice every year to feed his family. When walking with tourists through the fields he is often asked questions about rice, such as “are sticky rice and plain rice the same?” Or “What months is rice planted and harvested?” Bouakhet now typically gives a full explanation to tourists about rice farming when he reaches the fields during one of his tours. He explains the steps to rice planting as follows:

Steps for planting rice paddy

1. We usually start working in June. We start by preparing the dikes of the fields. This is typically done by men but women sometimes help as well. It is also important to clean the irrigation canals so that water will flow through them easily.



2. The next step is to soften the soil by watering the fields. We open the irrigation canals to let water onto the fields.
3. Next, the fields are plowed. Traditionally, the fields were ploughed by the men using a buffalo and a wooden plough. Nowadays many people are starting to use modern tractors, although people who do not have enough money still plough by buffalo.
4. We prepare a small plot of land, by watering it and making it muddy. This plot of land is used to grow the rice seedlings.
5. Next, we take some rice seed that has been stored from the last planting season and soak it in water for two nights and one day. This is typically done by the women.
6. Then we take the rice seed and plant it in the small plot that we prepared earlier. This is also done by the women, but men can help out, too.
7. We wait about one month until the rice has grown to about 20-30 centimeters high.
8. We then flood and plough the rice fields again, digging up the mud to make it easier to transplant the seedlings. Any grass that is located on the banks of the dikes must be cut. This work is typically done by men.
9. The day before planting, the tall rice seedlings are unearthed and tied into bunches, in order to make it easier to carry them to the surrounding fields the next day.
10. Finally, the women (and sometimes men) transplant the seedlings in the flooded fields. This takes about two days or more depending on how big the land is. Many people work in large groups with the help of extended family and friends.
11. After one week, the water level is checked to make sure that it is at the right level high enough to submerge the base of the rice plant but not so high as to drown it.
12. After four to five months the rice is harvested.

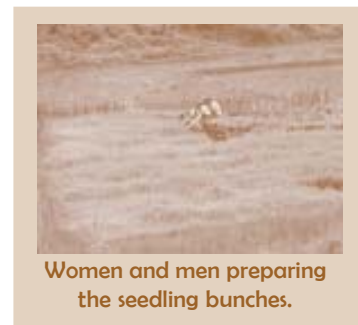


Preparation of the fields



Kees Sprengers

Traditional plowing by buffalo



Women and men preparing the seedling bunches.



Kees Sprengers

Women planting rice.

This explanation is a simplified version of what actually happens but it is enough to give the tourists a basic understanding of the process.



Exercise #11

Explain the steps for harvesting rice. Are there any special methods for harvesting that you use in your village that other villages don't?

Mr. Bouakhet, an ethnic Lanten person, entered the military at a young age and spent years as an infantryman living in forested areas. Bouakhet's extensive knowledge of forest plants and animals is now very valuable to him as guide. He now specializes in eco-treks and rafting tours into the Nam Ha National Protected Area, where he explains to tourists about the area's natural plant life and wildlife. Although he could not speak any English at all when he started working as a guide more than four years ago, Bouakhet learned English mainly on his own by speaking directly with tourists and now leads tours on his own without the assistance of a translator.



Mr. Bouakhet, a model local guide

Example: Protecting buffaloes from stingrays

In the Mekong River there is a species of stingray we call *Paa Faa Lai* (ປາ ຝາ ໄລ). It has a stinging barb (ໄລ) on the end of its tail like other stingrays. Buffaloes are particularly sensitive to this sting and will usually die if stung.

On Don Kho Island in the middle of the Mekong River just north of Pakse in the southern part of Lao, the islanders sometimes have to trade buffaloes with the villagers on the mainland. This means that they have to get the buffaloes to swim across to the mainland. Here the villagers risk losing their valuable stock to the stinging tail of a *Paa Faa Lai*. The villagers say that they have a natural stingray repellent and have used this technique to protect their buffaloes for longer than anyone can remember.

Before each buffalo has to swim across the channel, a vine is tied around its neck. This vine is very common in the south of Laos and is well known by all local people because the leaves smell like a dog's fart when crushed. In fact, the local name for the vine is *Kheua Tot Maa* (ເຄືອ ຕິດ ໝາ) (Dog's Fart Vine). The villagers say that the stingrays hate the smell of the dog's fart vine and will not go near the buffalo with the vine tied around its neck.



Exercise #12

Can you think of any local, herbal medicines that you use to treat your livestock, chickens or other animals?

Food

Many Lao people believe that tourists cannot eat sticky rice, that they cannot eat spicy foods and that they will not want to eat our local dishes. But how can we know this if we do not first allow a tourist to taste Lao food for themselves? Many tourists travel through Laos eating in restaurants, and never have the chance to actually eat authentic Lao cuisine. When traveling with a local guide or to local villages, tourists have a special opportunity to learn about one of Laos' most important and unique attractions--its food. Most tourists will be interested in trying out your local dishes and will want to learn how they are prepared. As a guide or a village host, your job is to show them how to prepare and eat local Lao foods. Something so common as this can teach a wealth of information to your guests and will be very enjoyable for them.

Example: A forest picnic

The Akha have for generations lived in harmony with their natural surroundings, sustaining themselves on the plentiful and nutritious varieties of forest fruits and vegetables. To collect this food, they spend a good deal of their time out in the fields and forests. Due to the long periods of time spent away from their village, they have subsequently developed traditional methods of cooking while on a "forest picnic".



The villagers of Ban Lao Kao, Muang Sing District have discovered that this tradition is very interesting to tourists, and have developed a trekking program that includes a traditional Akha forest picnic. Half way during the trek, at midday, a group of villagers, both men and women, meet the group of tourists (who are led by local guides) at a nearby waterfall. Here they teach the tourists how to prepare the meal and finally enjoy the lunch together. The program is performed as follows:

1. The villagers invite the tourists to follow them into the forest to collect things for lunch, such as bamboo shoots and fruits.



Miss Sae Seu shows the tourists how to collect bamboo shoots and forest fruits.



A tourist collecting bamboo shoots for lunch.



Mr. Lu Yae prepares the bamboo for boiling the rice.



Filling the bamboo with rice



Putting the bamboo near the fire and explaining to the tourists how long it takes to cook the rice.



2. The villagers show and explain how to prepare rice. The rice is prepared by first hollowing out a piece of bamboo and then filling it with rice and water. The bamboo is covered with banana leaves and then placed next to the fire.

3. Mouse Ear Mushrooms (*Het Hoo Noo*) are collected from the forest and then washed. After washing, herbs are cut up and mixed in with the mushrooms. Then, it is all wrapped up in a banana leaf and placed over hot coals for roasting.



Cleaning the mushrooms



Adding herbs



Mushrooms wrapped in banana leaf



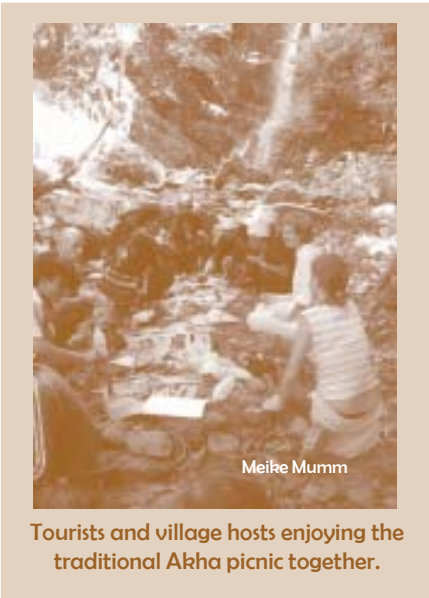
Roasting the mushrooms over hot coals

- 4. Other foods are also prepared, such a chili paste which is made with sesame seeds, and a chicken which is roasted over the fire.



- 5. While waiting for the food to cook, the village hosts teach the tourists how to make chopsticks, spoons, cups and cooking ware from bamboo and wood.

- 6. The meal is laid out on bamboo leaves. The villagers do not use any plastic, no plastic dishes, no plastic cups and no plastic mat because that would not be traditional and does not look beautiful to the tourists.



- 7. Finally, the meal is enjoyed together by the tourists and guides. The tourists feel more comfortable eating together with their hosts and eating together makes the food taste that much better!



Should you serve wildlife to tourists? Traditionally, an Akha lunch might include a wild bird or other wild meat taken from the forest. But because many animals are now becoming threatened, many Akha people now are helping to conserve wildlife and therefore do not serve it to tourists. Although some of your traditions might include wildlife, please do not serve wildlife to tourists and do not sell any wildlife products to Lao or foreign people.



Exercise #13

List some of the local foods special to your area or ethnic group. Choose one popular local dish and explain how to make it.

Crafts & clothing

There are many different types of crafts produced in villagers throughout Laos. Most of these crafts are unique to Laos or the region and are fascinating to tourists. Tourists not only like to purchase crafts, but like to learn how they are made. In fact, many tourists will pay money to see how a craft is made without even purchasing it. Although it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, for a tourist to take home a large craft such as a giant fish trap or a large earthen jar, the tourist can easily take home pictures and a story about how it is made. Your job as a guide is to show the tourist each step used in making the craft. Don't assume that the tourist will understand so easily, as most tourists have had no experience in making any of these crafts. So take your time and explain things in detail by using visuals and demonstration.

Example: Cotton thread making

Today the textile industry is a big business and is highly mechanized from planting the seed to sewing on the buttons. In many Lao villages the traditional skills of cotton thread production continue to be handed down from generation to generation. Much of the process has been unchanged for centuries.

In many Lao villages, young men learn the skills of house-building, hunting and growing rice to ensure that they have the skills essential to make them an attractive suitor for a young. One of the skills that young women traditionally learn when growing up in the village is weaving.

The first step in producing a cotton textile is to grow and process the threads, which will be woven into a bolt of cloth. This process, mainly carried out by women, starts when the raw cotton balls are brought freshly harvested from the field.

The steps of cotton thread production are as follows:

1. **Eeow Fai (Ginning):** The raw cotton is rolled between two wooden cylinders to remove the seeds from the fiber.
2. **Deet Fai (Carding):** The fibers are fluffed out and cleaned further.
3. **Lor Fai (Rolling):** The fluffed out fibers are rolled by hand into a long "sausage" shape.
4. **Khen Fai (Spinning):** The fibers are twisted onto each other by a spindle to make a continuous thread. The rate at which the cotton fibers are pulled on to the spindle determines the thickness of the thread. The skillful spinner will pull the fibers onto the spindle at a steady rate to make the thread of uniform thickness.
5. **Pia Fai (Winding):** The thread is wound on to the bobbin.

6. **Nyom Fai (Dyeing):** The thread is usually boiled in colored water to dye. Often barks and fruits are used as natural dyes.
7. **Kha Fai ("Sizing" or Starching):** The thread is soaked in water with beaten rice added to it. It is then wrung out after soaking, steamed on a fire and then dried. This process makes the thread stiffer and less fluffy. After this, the thread doesn't bend and fold as easily. If this stage is not done the thread will break easily when weaving.
8. **Kuak Fai (Winding):** The thread is finally wound onto a wheel and bundled for storage, or used immediately.
9. **Khon sai feua (Setting the warp threads):** Before setting the warp threads on the loom, they are set on a frame called a *feua* or *kheua* first.



Exercise #14

Name one craft that is commonly made by women in your village and name one craft that is commonly made by men. Choose one of these crafts and write down the steps for making the craft.

Example: Patterns of weaving

Patterns of Lao textiles are distinctively different from the north to the south of the country, especially between ethnic groups. Some patterns have subtle differences, which are only noticeable by the trained eye. In Phia Fai Village, located on the Mekong River about 50km south of Pakse, Champassak Province, the villagers commonly use a special pattern called *mak chap*. Some of the villagers say that this design is patterned after twisted barbed-wire, which is also called *mak chap*. Strangely, this design was invented and used in this village long before there was ever barbed-wire. How could that be? Some villagers speculate that the pattern was originally designed hundreds of years ago based on the shape of an edible vegetable the Chinese water chestnut which is also called *mak chap* and has a spike that resembles the jagged shape of the pattern. To make this design the weavers use a technique called *mat mee*. The silk threads are tie-dyed before weaving, and then through the use of pedals in the weaving loom and careful placement of the weft thread, the pattern is made. The *mak chap* pattern has been handed down in this village from generation to generation and is still popular today.



Jim Johnston

Mak Chap pattern



Exercise #15

Find a unique pattern used by your ethnic group. Note down what are its characteristics and what does it represent. Compare with another common pattern.



Example: Differences between ethnic clothing

To many people, the dress of the Akha looks the same. However, there are many differences in the clothing that different Akha groups wear. Two Akha women guides from Muang Sing describe for us a few of the differences between the traditional costumes of the *Akha Pouli Nyai* and the *Akha Pouli Noy*.

Akha Pouli Nyai	Akha Pouli Noy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The headdress is fully decorated with coins and metals. The crest that covers the top of the hat is also covered with coins and metal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The headdress has less coins and metal than the <i>Akha Pouli Nyai</i> headdress. The crest on the top of the hat is not decorated with any metal and shows instead the natural fibers of the hat.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Silver coins are worn along the lapels of the woman's jacket. The woman may adorn many silver pieces on her chest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No coins are worn along the lapel of the woman's jacket. Usually only one large silver piece is worn on her chest.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small, plain tassels are sewn on the bottom of the woman's shirt. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large, colourful tassels are attached to the bottom of the woman's shirt.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The traditional woman's skirt is worn just above the knees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The traditional woman's skirt is a bit shorter than that of the <i>Akha Pouli Nyai</i>.



Exercise #16

What are the traditional clothes of your village or ethnic group? Compare the differences between your traditional clothing and standard Lao traditional clothing. Describe any differences in the patterns of the cloth.



Akha Pouli Noy (left) and Akha Pouli Nyai (right)

Stories

There are many great stories in Laos. Most of these stories have never been heard by tourists. This is because most stories in Laos have never been written down and are only available orally. Hence, your stories will be of great interest to your guests. One important thing to remember, however, is that you should choose a story that has a meaning or a moral. There must be a reason why you are telling the story,

and the tourists will expect you to explain to them what the story means after you finish telling it. A story without a meaning or a moral is like a bus without a destination: people don't like to get on buses unless they know where it's going. So remember your destination and provide the meaning at the end of your story!

Example: The Story of Ang Dai & Seng Phet

This Lanten story is told by Mr. Lao Lee of Ban Nam Lue in Luang Namtha Province. The story is very interesting to tourists because of the lessons that it holds about men and women, and about Lanten culture. It is also a fun and emotional story that can make people laugh and cry if told well.

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Ang Dai, who was the youngest of three daughters. She heard that school was soon to open in town and asked her mother and father if she could go away to study. Her parents replied, "Only boys are allowed to go to school. Girls have never been allowed to study. And if you left, who would help us plant our thirty-six hectares of rice?" Ang Dai explained, "I will go to school to study agriculture, and when I return I will be better able to plant the fields on my own." Her parents, much to her delight, agreed to their daughter's clever idea. They then opened a chest and took out a boy's clothes: one shirt, a pair of new shoes, trousers and an umbrella. After Ang Dai got dressed up in her new outfit, disguised as a boy, she paid her respects to her parents and set off for school.

As Ang Dai walked down the road towards her new school, she came to a three-way intersection where there was a large tree, under which sat a boy. He was a very handsome young man indeed, with red lips and white skin. Ang Dai asked him where he was from and what his name was. He replied, "My name is Seng Yang, but people call me Seng Phet." Ang Dai introduced herself and they soon became friends. Seng Phet was two years older than Ang Dai, so she called him older brother, and he called her younger brother. (Remember, he thought that Ang Dai was a boy by the outfit that she wore.)

As they walked down the road towards school, they came to a large river. There was no boat for crossing, so Seng Phet took off his shirt and started swimming across to the other side. Ang Dai followed into the water but without taking off her shirt. Seng Phet asked, "Why don't you take off your shirt?" She responded, "It's OK because it's very hot today and we will walk a long distance to school, so my shirt will dry and I will stay cool. Also, I am afraid that if I take off my shirt that the water spirit or the forest spirit might see me." She kept her shirt on and swam across.

When they arrived at school, they paid their respects to their new teacher. The teacher immediately recognized that Ang Dai was a girl, but said nothing. Seeing that Ang Dai and Seng Phet were getting along well, he assigned them to share the same bed, where there was one blanket and one mosquito net. When it was time to go to bed, Seng Phet took off his shirt to prepare for sleep but Ang Dai did not. Seng Phet said to Ang Dai, "If you do not take off your shirt, then you will be too hot to sleep." She replied, "My mother fastened three hundred buttons to my shirt, so it will take very long to unbutton. It's easier to sleep with it on." She went to sleep with her shirt on.



Loung Lao Lee telling the Lanten story of Ang Dai & Seng Phet



The story written in Lanten script on traditional saa paper



At the end of Ang Dai's third year in school, there was a celebration for the New Year during which the students went on an excursion to a beautiful area full of blooming flowers. Ang Dai reminded Seng Phet, her good friend, that they were now about to graduate from school and that she would have to return home soon. Seng Phet said to Ang Dai, "Over these three years of studying together, we have become very good friends and have never fought or argued. After we graduate, we should go home together." Ang Dai responded, "Last night I had a dream of my parents. They are very old now, so I should go home very quickly, before you." She then announced to her classmates that she would be going home before everyone. She was very thankful for her opportunity to have studied in school and began paying her thanks to her classmates and teachers. She said to Seng Phet, "You are welcome to visit me at my house after you graduate. But he pleaded, "Please just wait a few more days and we will go together." She explained "Older brother, you are speaking without thinking. We are like one. I am like the sun and you are the land." The teachers heard Ang Dai's explanation and burst out laughing knowing that Seng Phet still did not recognize that Ang Dai was a girl.

After fifteen days, she arrived home. She paid her respects to her mother and father and then changed out of the boy's clothes and back into her normal woman's clothing. Her parents asked, "Why did you go for so long without coming back home?" Ang Dai replied, "I studied for three years and graduated with high marks. I can now read and write very well." Her parents were very delighted and replied, "We are very happy, too, that our daughter can now read and write."

Some time after arriving home, Ang Dai was asked to marry a young man from a nearby village. Her parents agreed and she began preparing for the engagement ceremony. That same day, Seng Phet came looking for Ang Dai's house to visit her as they had agreed. He found her house and entered. There he found a beautiful young woman dressed up in her best clothing, adorned with jewelry. She was as beautiful as the sun, and her eyes as beautiful as stars. She held in her hand a golden comb and an umbrella. The young woman invited Seng Phet to sit down and drink some tea. He explained, "My name is Seng Phet and I have come to visit my friend, Ang Dai, who I studied with over the past three years. Is Ang Dai here?" The woman replied, "Older brother, it is me who studied with you. You didn't know that it was me because I dressed up as a boy so that I could study." Seng Phet, realizing what had happened, stopped drinking his tea, became angry and started to cry. Ang Dai pleaded, "Older brother, don't be frightened. Please stay here tonight so that we can talk before you go." Seng Phet got up to leave, saying "I won't believe anything that you tell me." She pleaded once more, "Please, listen to what I have to say." But he couldn't listen anymore and left immediately, running out of the house. His shirt was wet with tears.

When Seng Phet returned to his house, he paid his respects to his father and mother and then went upstairs to be alone, without talking. His parents asked, "Son, you have been gone for so long and now that you have returned, you will not speak with us. Have we done something wrong? Are you angry because we did not send someone to meet you at the junction? Or because we did not have tea prepared for you when you arrived?" Seng Phet responded, "No. It's not because of that. At school I had a friend who I studied with. She dressed up like a boy to disguise herself. We ate together every meal. We slept under the same mosquito net, with one blanket and one pillow. Now, I have realized that she is not the same person I knew." Seng Phet's parents told him not to worry and to be patient. They told him that they should all go to see Ang Dai and resolve the matter, but he refused to go.

Seng Phet's mother decided to go visit Ang Dai on her own. After reaching the house, she explained to Ang Dai that Seng Phet was very upset and then asked if she would marry her son. Ang Dai replied, "Your son is a very great person and very handsome, however, the course of my life is following a different path. Over the last three days, I have become engaged with another young

man. My parents already agreed with the young man's family that we will get married. To relieve your son's pain, please give him some special medicine." Seng Phet's mother responded, "You don't understand. Our son is not in pain. He is broken hearted because he cannot be with you. If you become his wife, our son will surely feel better." Ang Dai then told Seng Phet's mother to take a message to him. She bit her finger to draw blood, and wrote a note with her blood on a piece of cloth. It read: "We cannot be husband and wife. But, we will be together in heaven." She asked that the note be placed underneath Seng Phet's pillow without him knowing. Seng Phet's mother took the note and left.

After returning home, Seng Phet's mother put the note under his pillow, as Ang Dai had asked. That night he dreamt that Ang Dai came into his bed and slept next to him. However, in the morning, he woke up to find himself alone. He picked up his pillow and found the note. After reading it and realizing that they could never be married, Seng Phet took the note and swallowed it, killing himself immediately. After finding their son dead, Seng Phet's parents buried his body near the tree at the intersection where he had met Ang Dai three years before.

A few days later, Ang Dai and her family set off to her wedding. As they walked down the road, they arrived at the junction where she had met Seng Phet. The sky was cloudy and grey. It was then that Ang Dai noticed the grave of Seng Phet. She placed some incense on his grave, knelt down and began crying. She took the silver pin out of her hair and placed it on the grave. She placed her hand on the grave and said, "Older brother, if you miss our time together, please make your grave break open now. If your grave does not open, I will see you later after I die." Seng Phet heard the voice of Ang Dai, and at that moment the grave split open. Ang Dai fell into the grave. Her fiancé tried to grab her, but was only able catch part of her shirt, which ripped as she fell in. The grave closed up behind her. Ang Dai's fiancé immediately ordered everyone to dig up the grave and rescue her. At the bottom of the grave, they found only a white box. They broke open the container, and two white butterflies flew out and away into the sky. Upset by the loss of his bride-to-be, Ang Dai's fiancé swallowed the piece of shirt that he had ripped from her when she fell into the grave, and killed himself immediately.

Everyone who was attending the wedding gathered around. An elder announced, "Three people have died in this tragic event. Please remember this event. From this tragic event we can learn that men and women should never dress up in fancy clothes. We should dress simply and wear plain clothes." The End.

One of the morals of this story is that women should be allowed to go to school. Can you think of others?



Exercise #17

**Do you know any stories? Tell a story to your classmates.
What is the meaning of your story?**

Taboos

There are many taboos in Laos, which are specific for different ethnic groups, different religions and different places. It is important that tourists understand taboos so that they do not break them or create any cultural misunderstandings. Tourists are also interested to understand why there is a taboo and what its history is. Remember that you should not only tell a tourist about do's & don'ts, but more importantly and more interestingly tell them about *why* there is a taboo and what it means.



Example: Taboo of not raising ducks and pigs in Ban That Ing Hang

If you know the history of Thad Inghang Stupa, one of the most sacred places in southern Laos, you will know why it has the name *Inghang*. The villagers say that here, the Buddha was traveling past this area and, after eating the meat from a local pig, became very ill and stopped to rest and recover. Here, the Buddha leaned (*Ing*) against the base of a *hang* tree (a local native tree with the scientific name of *Shorea siamensis*). Therefore, when a stupa was made at this site it was given the name Thad Inghang (stupa-lean against-hang tree).



That Ing Hang Stupa

All the residents of Ban Thad, the village located beside Thad Inghang Stupa, have a strict taboo that they all have followed through history. That is, that they will never raise pigs or ducks in this village. Recently, there has been scientific evidence that when animals like pigs and ducks are raised in very close contact with each other and with humans, diseases can jump from one species to another and create new epidemics. The wisdom of not raising the pigs and the ducks so close together may actually have a lesson in it that the larger world can learn from.

Example: Taboo of termite hills in Akha villages

While walking through the forest, two Akha guides, Mr. Soung Se (ທຸ້ງ ແຊ), Mr. Phone Phet (ພອ ເພັດ), and their English-speaking translator, Mr. Somchanh, happen upon a termite hill. They stop and explain to the tourists that it is a termite hill as the tourists had never seen one before and tell them to look at the termites crawling out from the top of it. They explain that termites are a major pest in Laos and that they can do a lot of damage to homes and other wooden products. But there is something more interesting and more unique that the Akha guides continue to explain to the tourists: "Termite hills are taboo in Akha villages." They explain:



Guides explaining to a tourist about a termite hill

"Termite hills are taboo in Akha villages because termites can do a lot of damage. It is a bad sign for the village and must be corrected immediately. A ceremony must be made to get rid of the termites, the termite hill and any bad spirits that are associated with it. The ceremony, usually performed by a village elder, entails killing one chicken and one pig and making an offering that includes parts of the dead animals, one egg, some ginger and salt. The offering is placed at the base of the termite hill and is allowed to attract the termites. After that, the termite hill is dug up, destroyed and discarded outside the village."

This information is surely something that the tourists will remember and tell their family and friends when they return to their country. It is information about termites that is unique to Laos and the Akha people.



Exercise #18

Make a list of some of the common taboos in your village. For each taboo can you explain why it is a taboo and what happens if someone breaks the taboo?

Music

Music is something that can be enjoyed by anybody without any explanation or any words at all. Tourists will want to learn about indigenous music and local instruments, such as the *kaen*. They will want to hear what sounds it makes, learn how it is played, and even get a chance to touch and play the instrument themselves. For those of you who do not know how to play a local instrument, singing traditional songs to the tourists can be performed instead. To make your performance more memorable, you can teach the tourists how to sing the song and, then, have them sing along with you. You will find that singing local songs together with the tourists is not only fun, but can be a very powerful tool to bridge language and cultural barriers without any speaking involved.

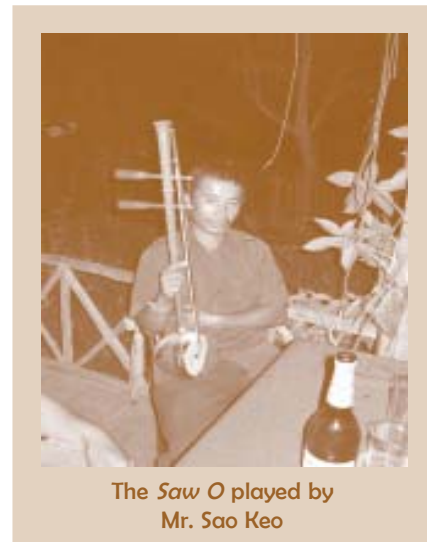
Example: Tai Kalom music

Mr. Sao Keo, Mr. Bountan, Mr. Kong Chan, and Mr. Kamda form a traditional *Tai Kalom* music quartet performing regularly for guests at the Boat Landing Guesthouse in Luang Namtha. Since starting their performances for tourists at the guesthouse just a few years ago, the group's popularity has increased, and they are now often invited to play at various festivals, *baci* ceremonies, weddings and parties. The musicians note that during their parents' generation, traditional *Tai Kalom* and Lao music were very popular and widely played by musicians in town. However, due to a declining popularity in traditional music, there remains only a few people in the area who know how to play these traditional instruments.

All four members of the band say that they learned how to play their instruments by ear and touch alone, without any formal lessons or books. In fact, they say that the music they play is not written down anywhere at all and must, therefore, be played from memory alone.

In the quartet are four instruments:

Saw O: This is a two-string instrument played with a bow, producing a lower tone than the *Saw Ee*. It is produced in Luang Prabang.



The *Saw O* played by Mr. Sao Keo



The *Saw Ee* played by Mr. Kong Chan

Saw Ee: This is also a two-string instrument played with a bow, producing a higher tone than the *Saw O*. This is the loudest instrument in the quartet. It is also produced in Luang Prabang.



Kat-da-pee: In English, this is called a mandolin and looks like a small guitar. It is now used to take the place of a more traditional guitar-like instrument, which is no longer produced locally.



The *Kat-da-pee* played by Mr. Kam Da



The *Kong* played by Mr. Bountan

Kong: This is a traditional drum made from buffalo hide and wood.

In addition to these four instruments, traditionally there were two other instruments played, the flute and the Lao xylophone, to make the band a sextet. Unfortunately, there are no players in town available to play these instruments.

The band is regularly called on by the guesthouse to come and play for a few hours in the evening when there are a lot of dinner guests. The band does not speak English, so they must rely on their instruments to do the talking. And with each stroke of the *Saw Ee*, pluck of the *Kat-da-pee*, and beat of the *Kong*, the musical traditions of the *Tai Kalom* people fills the restaurant, providing the guests with an experiential lesson into Lao musical history.



The *Tai Kalom* Music Quartet playing for guests at the Boat Landing Guesthouse.

Example: Akha singing

Ms. Nang Mee Sao (ນ. ມີ ເຊາຍ) and Ms. Nang Sae Seu (ນ. ແຂະ ເຊີ), two Akha women guides in Muang Sing usually spend their days walking out to their fields or into the forests for collecting plants to feed their children and families. It is an Akha tradition to pass the time and make the difficult walks through the mountains and fields by singing together. These songs are not pre-written, but rather the singers develop their verses as they sing. Sometimes they alternate between singers, in a fashion that is similar to two people having a conversation back and forth. When Ms. Mee Sao and Ms. Sae Seu travel with tourists on a tour, they enjoy singing for them, as they have been told that the tourists enjoy this tradition. Here is an example of one of their unrehearsed songs.

A sample from an Akha song:

"Give us something to remember today.
We sing how we feel.
As we sing this song
We remember all those who have been
on this trail before us.
When the birds fly high in the sky
Don't forget to look up.
And if the birds fly out of sight,
Don't stop singing.
When you look ahead,
Don't forget to look behind.
What we sing today,
Don't forget tomorrow."



Ms. Mee Sao and Ms. Sae Seu singing on the trail.



Exercise #19

Do you know any local songs? Practice teaching how to sing a local song to a group of tourists. Take your time and be patient. It will take the tourists some time to learn the song.

Forest products

In many foreign countries people buy all of their products in the market. Most raw products are produced on farms and processed in factories. In Laos, we collect many of our plants, vegetables, fruits, medicines and raw materials from the forest. This is very fascinating to tourists, as they have never seen people collect things from the forest. To pick fruits and vegetables from the forest is a new and special experience for most tourists. Your knowledge about the forest is something that would take a tourist years and years to learn in a classroom. This knowledge is very valuable, not only as a tour guide, but for your livelihood.

What a tour guide needs to do in order to explain things about non-timber forest products is to explain how a forest product is used and what is special about it. For example, saying that something is simply "good for your health" is not very descriptive and does not give the tourist a good idea of what the plant is really used for. Instead you might explain that it is "especially good for back aches". You will need to explain how to collect the forest product, how it is prepared and any special facts about it. The more that you explain, the better.



Many plants and fruits in Laos do not have English names. Even if a plant does have an English name you may not know it. You will typically need to teach the Lao name and the local name to the tourists, and perhaps the tourist will teach you the English name if there is one.

Example: Mak Bow

Nang Chanh Kham, a young Khmu woman from Ban Sop Sim Ngai village in Luang Namtha Province, learned about the use of plants from her mother and father while growing up in her village. As a local guide, Ms. Kham enjoys teaching tourists about plants while leading them through the forests of the Nam Ha Protected Area. Some of these plants include *Mak Naeng* (cardamom – used for stomach sickness); *Yord Vai* and *Naw Mai* (bamboo and rattan shoots – are common foods in rural villages); and *Mai Pai* (bamboo – used for constructing houses).

One of Chanh Kham's favorite plants to explain to tourists is *Mak Bow*. When she sees this plant on the trail, she stops and cuts a piece of it to show to the tourists, showing them its red color on the inside. She then explains as follows:

"This is called *Mak Bow*. It is used by Khmu people as a medicine to cure stomachaches. I don't know the name in English. It can be used by adults to cure stomachaches, but it is never given to small children because it is too strong. The medicine is prepared by first peeling the skin off and then putting half of the bulb in water to boil. Not much water is necessary because you don't need to drink more than one cup, as it is quite bitter and strong. If you are very sick, you should drink one cup in the morning and one in the evening for a few days until you get better.

Mak Bow can also be used to soothe foot sores. You can do this by simply boiling some *Mak Bow* in water and then soaking your feet in the hot water for ten to fifteen minutes. You should do this a few times until your feet feel better.

Mak Bow is also used for making natural red dye. You can see that it is red on the inside [she points to the inside of plant]. When I was young, we used to dye our clothes using *Mak Bow* by boiling a drum of water with it and then soaking the clothes in the water for one to two hours. Then the clothes are dried in a shaded area so the sun won't cause the dye to fade. Nowadays, many people buy synthetic red dye in the market instead."



Exercise #20

Choose one local medicinal plant. Explain what it is used for, how it is used, what its benefits are, and what its local name is.

Example: Nyang oil

Nyang oil (*Naman Nyang* ນ້ຳມັນ ຍ້າງ) is a very useful oil that is harvested naturally from the Nyang Tree by villagers throughout Laos. The tree oil is commonly used as a fuel for oil lamps, as a waterproofing sealant for boats and baskets, a varnishing agent that protects bamboo products from insect damage, and as a sticky material used trapping birds. The process for extracting the oil is explained as follows.

The mid-section of the *Nyang* tree is chopped, without cutting entirely into the core, to allow the sap from the tree (*Nyang* oil) to ooze out. Below this section, a smaller area is carved into a dish-

like pocket so as to collect the sap as it drips down from the freshly chopped mid-section. After three days, the villagers return to the tree to collect its oil, which has dripped down from the chopped section and collected into the carved pocket. Next, the chopped section is lit on fire and allowed to burn for three minutes in order to induce more oil production. The tree is revisited again after another three days to collect more of its oil and to burn the tree again for further oil production. Each year this process is repeated again and again sometimes up to ten times for a healthy *Nyang* Tree each time yielding less and less oil. Finally, once the tree can produce no more oil at all, it is left alone to heal itself, and the villagers move on to another new tree for tapping.



Exercise #21

List some common products that are used for making things, such as houses, furniture, crafts or tools. List as many as you can.

Wildlife

Knowledge about where wildlife can be seen is very useful information because tourists want to see wildlife. If you can take tourists to a spot that frequently has wildlife, tourists will be very happy. If tourists actually see wildlife on your trip, they will likely tell other tourists, and in the future you will have a lot of business as a guide.

Knowledge about where to see signs of wildlife, such as footprints, scat or nests, is also important and interesting to tourists. You should think about anything that you know about wildlife behavior, such as what they eat, where they like to live, who are predators and prey, and where they live in different seasons. All of this information can be interesting to tourists. If you are taking tourists to see wildlife, you should explain as much as you can about it. If the tourist does not see the wildlife, he will at least be happy that you taught him a lot about the habitat and what lives there.

Local stories related to wildlife are also interesting to tourists because stories, unlike facts about wildlife, are typically not available in books. Many ethnic cultures in Laos have stories that involve wildlife. Stories that say good things about wildlife and conservation are important to tell tourists because tourists typically care about protecting wildlife and the environment.

Example: Local knowledge about monkeys

Mr. Lao Pao of Ban Ta Louang, a Hmong village in Vieng Phoukha district, was the original founder of his village back in 1991. Before living in the village however, he lived in the forest that surrounds a nearby cave, *Tam Prasat* (also known as *Tam Nam Mai*). Here he learned, by necessity and experience, about the area's wildlife and forests. Today, Mr. Lao Pao's knowledge about the forest, especially about monkeys, is useful as a tour guide for tourists who visit the cave.

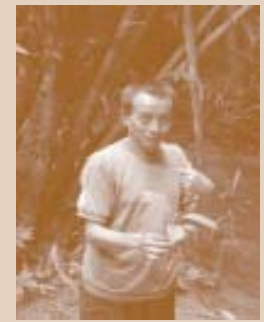


Mr. Lao Pao explaining about the monkey's eating habits

He explains that there are three types of monkeys that live near the cave: a long tailed monkey that commonly walks on the ground; a short-tailed monkey that prefers to live in trees; and a snub-tailed monkey which is red and black and prefers to live high above in the rocky cliffs. (Although Mr. Lao Pao does not know the Lao or English names of the monkeys, he does know them well by sight and behavior.) He explains the behavior of the monkeys as being shy and says that they are difficult to see during the day. During the evenings, the monkeys prefer to be high up above on the mountain's rocky cliffs to protect themselves from hunters and predators. Evenings, he says, are the best time to view the monkeys. In the mornings, you can sometimes hear the monkeys sing, especially during the cold and dry season. Mr. Lao Pao points out to the tourists the various kinds of fruits, shoots and leaves that the monkeys eat. The monkeys prefer to eat the fruits, but they will also forage on shoots, leaves and vines when the fruits are not available. Mr. Lao Pao explains that a good sign of whether the monkeys are nearby or not is to look and see if there are any fruits remaining: If there are not a lot of fruits remaining then we can assume that the monkeys



The mountain nearby Ban Ta Louang that has populations of monkeys



Showing to the tourists a vine eaten by monkeys

are around because they have been eating the fruits. All of this information is very interesting to tourists, even though on this day they did not see a monkey.



Exercise #22

What are some common species of wild animals or birds near your village? Choose one species that you know well and explain where it lives, what it prefers to eat, and who its predators/prey are. How and where would you take a tourist to see this species? In the evening or in the morning? The cold season or rainy season? What signs of the animal is it possible to see (footprints, claw marks, partly eaten plants...)?

Local folklore about monkeys

Nearby Ban Ta Louang are two Akha villages, Ban Nam Lo and Ban Pouyer, which are known for the population of Black-Cheeked Gibbon, a very rare and endangered species of monkey that lives in forests nearby the villages. Recently, many tourists have begun visiting the area to see the monkeys and listen to their beautiful calls. Although some Akha people value the fur of these monkeys for ceremonial and decorative purposes, the villagers of Ban Pouyer and Ban Nam Lo also believe that killing



Villagers of Ban Nam Lo believe that killing gibbons is taboo.

the gibbons is taboo. The villagers explain that there was once a local hunter who killed one of the gibbons, but when he returned to the village, he and his family got sick and died mysteriously. The villagers believe that the gibbon has a spirit which is very powerful and can kill you if you harm it. This belief is not only interesting to the tourists but also helps to protect this important species. This story is told to the tourists before visiting the forest home of the Gibbons.



Exercise #23

Does your village or ethnic group have any stories that involve animals? Tell one of these stories to your classmates. What is the meaning of the story?

Hunting & fishing

Traditional hunting and fishing techniques can be very interesting to tourists. Tourists are familiar with the use of modern guns and modern fishing equipment but may have never seen traditional hunting traps or locally made fishing equipment. Although your job as a guide is to protect wildlife and not to kill it so that tourists have a chance to see it, it is ok to talk about hunting and to explain how hunters use traditional techniques and equipment.

There are many tourists who go on special fishing tours and pay lots of money to do so. As a local fisherman with knowledge of local fish species and local methods of fishing, you have a great opportunity to guide tourists on fishing trips. Do not assume that tourists will understand how to use your traditional fishing gear. You will need to explain and demonstrate how to use fishing equipment and then let the tourists try it out themselves.

Example: Crossbows and poison arrows

In Laos, wooden cross-bows have been traditionally used for hunting. The bow part of the cross-bow is usually made of a durable but springy wood that doesn't crack when flexed. The string is usually made from the bark of a shrub with strong fibers that is very difficult to break unless cut with a knife.

Depending on the size of the cross-bow and the springiness of the wood, the hunter can shoot a split bamboo arrow about 20 metres. In Ban Ta'ong, in the south of Champasak Province, the hunters traditionally make a cross-bow that is larger than the usual one and can shoot up to 200 metres. They call this *Naa Kha*. The *Kha* is actually the bow section and is made from the wood of a local tree we call *Gwak* tree. The wood from this tree is selected because it is particularly strong, flexible and durable and does not splinter or break when bent.

If you have ever drawn back the string of even a small *Naa*, you will realize the strength and special skill required to use it. The person who can draw back the string and shoot the arrow from the *Naa Kha* 200 metres is surely one of rare strength and skill.



Crossbow competition in Vieng Phoukha District, Luang Namtha.

Before the arrow is fired from this bow, its tip is dipped into a natural poison. This poison is made from the sap of a tree called *Nong*. This is a very powerful poison and if the hunter



accidentally pricks himself with the poison arrow tip, or if the *Nong* solution touches a cut in his skin, he will die. In Ban Ta'ong village, luckily, they have a cure (antidote): The patient can be cured by eating freshly grilled crabs. The villagers strictly do not store their *Nong* poison anywhere near crabs, for the toxin will become ineffective.



Exercise #24

Bring to your class one local trap used for trapping wildlife, birds or insects. Explain how the trap is used and what it is used for. If you do not have one you can draw a picture of one instead, and then explain it.

Example: The giant fish trap (*Kha*)

The villagers of Don Daeng Island in Champasak explain how to fish using a traditional fish trap, called a *Kha*. This is basically a large bamboo woven basket with a wide open end that has a vine strap handle attached to it. The basket is submerged half-way under water and tied it to a stake or peg in the ground on the river bank.

It is then filled with leafy branches of trees (any tree will do) and other fish attractants like buffalo bones (if you have any). The open end must face the shore, but must also be under the water deep enough so that the fish can swim into it, hide in the leafy branches and nibble on the buffalo bones. The fish feel very safe and happy under the cover of the leafy branches and will stay there until it is time to drag the basket onto the shore. The trap is usually left overnight and dragged out in the early morning. When dragging the basket out of the water, you don't even get wet! Simply pull the vine handle from the river-bank and up comes a basket wriggling with fish.

The villagers mention that in the old times, the *Kha* basket was more widely used than mesh nets. This is because it was much easier to make these baskets from bamboo than making mesh nets from vines and bark. Nowadays, however, the nylon or monofilament for making fishing nets can be bought quite easily and cheaply, making synthetic nets more common. The villagers of Don Daeng Island still believe, however, that the convenience of putting the *Kha* basket into the water with the fish attractants and coming back the next morning to haul out the fish is still a good reason to continue to pass down the skills of weaving these traps to the younger generations.



Jim Johnston

A traditional fish trap



Jim Johnston

A villager preparing a fish trap



Exercise #25

Describe what kind of fish are commonly caught in local rivers. Explain what are the common methods for catching fish. If tourists are available, take them out fishing and teach them how to fish using traditional gear, such as a castnet.

Chapter 3

Techniques for Interpreting Local Knowledge

What methods can you use to transfer your valuable local knowledge to tourists? The answer to this question is not as simple as you may think. Verbally explaining all of your knowledge to the tourists is only one of the many methods available. In fact, for those local guides who do not speak any foreign languages at all, verbal explanation is quite useless.

People learn in different ways. Some people prefer to learn by listening to their teacher; some like to read books; others learn best through discussions with fellow students; some prefer to watch demonstrations; and others like to learn by doing. Most people, however, learn best by using a combination of all of these methods. By having many activities to do (listening, discussion, demonstration, practice and reading) a student will stay interested in the subject and will not become tired of learning.

Tourists are like students; they have come to learn about Lao culture, nature and history. By using a variety of methods of interpretation, you can hold your guests' attention and keep them interested in your local knowledge.

Experience is perhaps the most important element of learning. Suppose, for example, you wanted to learn how to make Japanese food. If you had never eaten it, never tasted it, never seen any pictures of it, and had never seen anyone demonstrate how to make it, could you cook Japanese food simply by reading a cookbook? Perhaps you could, but it would probably not taste or look anything like the real thing. If, on the other hand, you were able to see Japanese food, taste it, watch someone make it and then practice making it yourself with the help of a Japanese person, you would likely be able to cook some tasty Japanese food. In short, there is no substitute for experience.

Tourists are like novice cooks: they need demonstrations, practice and real examples in order to learn about and understand Lao culture, nature and history. They want to experience Laos. Your job as a local guide is to provide them with real examples from your life and culture and to facilitate a variety of experiential learning activities.

Using the five senses

There are five ways that a tourist can experience something. These are: **sound**, **sight**, **taste**, **smell**, and **touch**. When guiding, you must facilitate activities that appeal to these five senses. If you only speak, you will appeal to only one sense (sound), leaving the other four senses idle. Below is a brief description of what you can do to appeal to each of the five senses.

Sound: This includes talking and explaining things verbally. It also includes teaching tourists about the sounds of birds, insects and other animals. Likewise, singing and playing music using local instruments appeals to this sense.

Sight: This means showing objects or demonstrating activities by using actions. Tourists can learn by watching you do something, such as performing a ceremony or making a craft. They can learn by seeing an object or through drawings, as well.



Taste: Explaining the taste of a plant or a food is best done by allowing the tourists to taste it. The adventure of a tour includes not only mountain climbs, dense jungle and difficult terrain, but also tasting new and different foods. So don't be afraid to help tourists explore their sense of taste with Lao foods, forest plants and fruits.

Smell: Aromas from food, plants, nature and other things are interesting and different to tourists. Allowing tourists to enter your kitchen and help with cooking is a good activity. Taking them into the forest or into agricultural fields also appeals to this sense, allowing the tourists to immerse their nasal senses into the natural world.

Touch: Tourists want to directly experience local life in Laos and are interested in participating in a variety of activities, such as fishing, cooking, picking fruits and vegetables, planting rice, making handicrafts and many other things. It is OK to allow tourists help in your daily chores and activities. The best way to teach tourists about something is by actually allowing them to do it!



Exercise #26

Describe five activities that you can do with tourists which appeal to each of the five senses.

Below are some techniques for transferring your local knowledge to tourists. Remember that using many techniques and methods will make your tour more interesting, more memorable and more enjoyable for the tourists. It will also make your job easier and less tiring. *Remember, speaking is not the only method that a guide can use to interpret his or her local knowledge.*



This Hmong kaen is used during funerals and provides a musical path for the spirit to follow up to heaven. What senses does this instrument appeal to?

Guiding by showing (performance & demonstration)

If a local guide cannot speak a foreign language and does not have the assistance of a translator, how can he or she explain things to the tourist? How can the local guide be assist the tourist without knowing the words to explain things? Many local guides throughout Laos will have to ask themselves these questions sometime in their career, as most guides start out without little or no foreign language skills. Guiding by showing is the method that you will have to use if you cannot speak a foreign language or do not have the assistance of a foreign-language speaking guide.

Demonstration

Demonstrating how to use something or how an activity is performed is a very good way to make an explanation. Even if you can speak a foreign language, demonstration is often necessary in order to get the tourists to visualize what you have explained—especially if it is something that they have never seen or done before.

You can use hand signals and actions to explain what something is used for. Suppose, for example, you would like to explain that a medicinal plant is used to treat stomachpains. You could show the plant to the tourists and then pat your stomach, to indicate that it is used for the stomach. You would then act out that your stomach is in pain, after which you would point to the plant and make a happy/smiley face to indicate that it cures the stomachache. This simple act could get across your point without any words.

Most tourists have never pounded rice. If you wanted to show how a rice pounding mortar and pestle is used, you could first demonstrate how the rice is put into the mortar. Then you might pick up the pestle and pound the rice a few times. Finally, you would show the tourists the difference in the rice before and after pounding. The tourists would quickly understand what this tool is used for. This takes no words only actions.

When demonstrating something more complicated, you should break the demonstration into parts to make it easier for the tourist to understand. Like eating a steak, cutting your demonstration into pieces makes it easier to digest. For example, if you want to demonstrate Lao dance, you could break it into four parts as follows:



1. First, show the hand movements of the dance.
2. Next, you could show the feet movements.

3. Then, you could show how the men and women are positioned and how they move together.
4. Finally, show the whole dance, performing all of the movements together.



Exercise #27

Demonstrate to your class a local dance or local song. Break the dance or song into three or more parts, demonstrating each part separately. Finally, demonstrate the entire song or dance in full.

Performance

Dance, music and ceremonies are activities that many tourists are interested in seeing.

Here are some tips for making performances:

- It is best to make the performance after meal times, perhaps in the evening, when tourists are relaxed.



- You can do performances either outside or inside, however, wherever you do the performance be sure that there is adequate seating for the tourists. Be sure that all of the tourists are comfortably seated and that seats are arranged in such a way that allows everyone to see the performers.
- If you are making the performance inside be sure that there is enough light for people to see.
- Performers should wear traditional clothes to enhance the visual quality of the performance.
- Before the performance, announce what will be performed and the name of the person(s) performing it. Also explain anything important about the performance. For example:

“We will be performing traditional Hmong music played with the *kaen*. The performers are Mr. Lao Yao and Mr. Lao Ya. This music is played during the Hmong New Year’s festival.”

It is possible to perform certain ceremonies for tourists, such as a *baci* ceremony or other religious ceremonies. However, be aware that some tourists may only want to see real ceremonies and would prefer not to see any ceremony at all if it is a performance.



Hmong *kaen* performers

A note about culturally appropriate demonstrations

If you believe that something is culturally inappropriate to demonstrate, you are not obliged to do the demonstration. For example, an Akha person may feel shy to demonstrate how to use an Akha swing during non-festival times because it is taboo to do so. In such a case, the guide would not be required to make the demonstration and can, instead, explain the use of the swing without demonstrating its use.



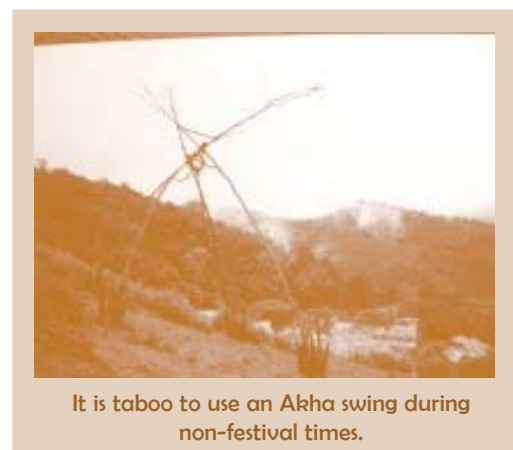
Performing a *baci* ceremony is something that you can do when tourists visit your village

Guiding by doing (experience and activities)

One of the best ways for tourists to learn about something and one of the most enjoyable things for a tourist to do is to actually participate in a local activity. Even though tourists are on vacation, some of them would like to help villagers with their daily chores. Many tourists do not mind getting a little bit dirty and trying out new things. Many common activities in a village are very interesting and exciting for tourists. You do not need to know a foreign language to invite a tourist to do an activity with you.

Here is a list of some of the activities that you might invite a tourist to do with you:

- plant rice
- harvest rice



It is taboo to use an Akha swing during non-festival times.

- weed
- thresh
- pound rice
- plant vegetables
- pick vegetables
- feed livestock
- collect forest products
- make baskets
- weave
- take food to the monks
- repair a house
- make roof thatch
- fetch water
- plant trees
- prepare and cook food
- go fishing
- take care of the children



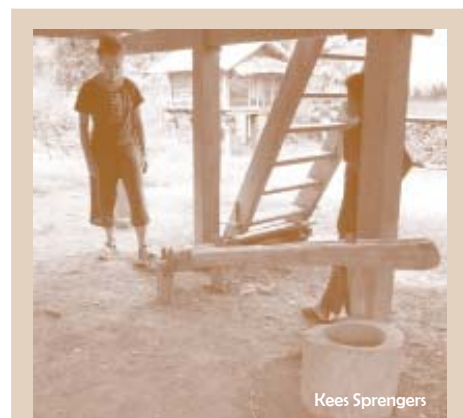
Exercise #28

Can you think of other common activities in your village that you would like to invite tourists to do? List all of the activities that you would like to teach to tourists. Which activities are appropriate for men to teach and which are appropriate for women to teach?

Most tourists do not know how to do any of these things. Your job as a guide is to teach them how to do the activity. Here are three simple steps for guiding a tourist during an activity:

1. First, demonstrate how to do the activity. Show the tourist how to do the activity slowly. Demonstrate two or three times so the tourist is sure to understand what to do.
2. Next, allow the tourist to try to do the activity on their own. Have them practice a few times while you watch.
3. If the tourist needs more help, show them again until he or she can do the activity on their own.
4. Finally, allow the tourist to do the activity with you or by himself. There is no time limit for how long the activity should last. Some tourists will only want to try it out for a short time, while others will want to spend a lot of time doing it.

The key to this type of guiding is to be patient, take the right amount of time to teach the tourist how to do the activity, and finally let them do it on their own (even if they are not very good at it).



Kees Sprengers

Tourists enjoy learning how to perform common tasks, such as pounding rice.



Exercise #29

Choose one activity that you would like to teach to tourists. Make a plan for how you would teach it to them. Finally, take a group of tourists to your village for half a day and do the activity together with them.

A note about culturally appropriate activities

If you believe that an activity is culturally inappropriate to do with a tourist, you are not obliged to perform it. For example, there are some activities that may be inappropriate for female tourists participate in and others that are inappropriate for men to participate in. In some villages, for example, it is not appropriate for women to handle meat, so it would be inappropriate for women tourists to participate in an activity of cooking meat. Instead, you could ask the women tourists to participate in the activity of preparing vegetables, while the male tourists prepare the meat. In most villages, it would be inappropriate for a male tourist to go alone with a female villager into the forest to collect bamboo shoots. In such case, it would be better to have the male tourists go to the forest in a group with both men and women villagers. There are many other examples such as this. It is up to you to determine what is and what is not appropriate to do with tourists and to tell them accordingly.



Exercise #30

Are there any activities that you feel would be culturally inappropriate to do with tourists? Why?

Guiding by speaking (explanation)

The most common way that you can teach tourists about your local knowledge is through verbal explanation. There are some basic techniques that you first need to know in order to give a good explanation. When you watch a performance or a television show you might notice some things that the actors do. They never put their backs to the audience and you can always see their face. They speak loud enough so that everyone can hear them. They change their tone of voice to show when they are sad, happy, angry or excited. They also use their arms and hands to express their feelings. *As a local guide, you must make yourself as interesting and attractive as an actor in a performance or a movie. You must use your voice, your body and your hands to get your point across in an interesting manner.*

Location

It is best to make explanations at the location of the place or thing that you are explaining. For example, if you are explaining about how to build a house, make your explanation at the site of the house. If you are explaining how to cook food, make your explanation in the kitchen.



The best place to explain how to make local Lao whiskey is where they make it.



Exercise #31

Where would you choose to explain about the following things: (1) wildlife behavior, (2) planting vegetables, (3) war history, (4) Buddhism, (5) collection of bamboo shoots.

Communication Skills

Position: Before you start explaining something it is important to position yourself in a place that allows all of the tourists to see and hear you easily. If you are going to show something while you speak, you should be sure that *all* of the tourists in your group will be able to see what you are showing. If you are in a large, open area you can stand in a place that allows the tourists to stand around you in a semi-circle. Be sure not to turn your back to the tourists and be sure that all tourists are located in front of you. If you are on a narrow trail, you can stand a little bit above the tourists on a hill, a rock or a tree stump so that they can see you. If you are in the fields, you can stand on a rice paddy dike diagonally across from the tourists so that they can see you. If you stand in a single file line, the tourists in back will not be able to see or hear you. If you will be speaking for a long time, you should find a comfortable place to sit down and have your guests sit in a semi-circle around you.

Body Language: Use your hands, your arms and your body to help you make explanations more interesting. Watching someone stand still while they speak can be quite boring. Actors who use actions are fun to watch; actors who only speak put us to sleep. Point to things; use your hands to show what something looks like; make an action to help the tourists imagine what you are explaining; or simply move around a bit so that people do not get bored looking at you in one direction.

Intonation: You should change the tone of your voice to express different feelings. If, instead, you speak in a monotone voice with no variation, the tourists will become bored and uninterested. For example if you are explaining how an animal catches its prey, you might first start by speaking in a soft tone to express the animal moving quietly through the forest. Then, you would continue building up with a louder and louder voice until finally you reach the point when the animal kills its prey.

Eye Contact: Always make eye contact with your guests when speaking. To show that you are speaking to everyone in your group, you must look into each person's eyes. If you make eye contact with only one person while you are making your explanation, your other guests will feel that you have forgotten them and that you are not talking to them. Look around the group to everyone and make them all feel included.

Volume: Sometimes you will be in a group of six or more people. You must speak loud enough for people to hear you, even if you have someone translating for you. The tourists will want to hear your voice, even if they cannot understand everything that you say. You should talk loud enough so that the people in back can hear you. Before you start talking, you should ask the people in back if they can hear you and adjust your volume accordingly.



A guide positioned so that all of the tourists are standing around him in a circle



The guide is standing a bit above the tourists so those in back can see him.



This guide did not know how to say 'deaf' in English, so he uses an action to show what he means.



These two guides demonstrate how a shaman can cure snake bites by blowing on it.



Exercise #32

In front of the classroom, practice giving an orientation about a tour. Make sure that you are positioned well so that everyone can see you, make eye contact, use body language, and speak loudly and clearly. Make your orientation interesting and engaging.

Use of Visuals

You can use objects to make your explanations more real to life. Using objects will also help you when you do not know the words for certain things in the foreign language. If, for example, you are explaining how to plant and harvest rice, you could display various farm implements to match your explanations. For instance, as you talk about how to prepare the rice fields, you could point to a plow and a yoke. Or, as you describe how to harvest rice, you could hold up a sickle.

Passion

Your enthusiasm and your interest in giving information to tourists is very important. If you appear to be very interested and excited about your local knowledge and about the attractions that you are explaining, the tourists will also become interested and feel that they have a special tour guide. Conversely, if you seem shy, unexcited and uninterested in the things that you are explaining, the tourists will not find it interesting and will likely begin to wonder why they are on a tour with you. *Only those people who have enthusiasm, excitement and passion about showing their local area should be tour guides.* Although you have probably seen most of the sites on your tour hundreds, if not thousands of times already, for the tourists everything is new and exciting. So remember, explain everything as if it is the first time that you have seen it, too.



Exercise #33

List three reasons why you want to be a guide.



This woman is explaining about pottery production in her village. She uses real pots as visuals to help make her explanation.



This guide is drawing a picture of an ancient area during his tour to give the tourists an idea of where they are and what the area used to look like 500 years ago

Involving the Tourists

If the guide is the only one who speaks, the tourists will become bored and stop listening. At the end of each explanation, you should always ask if anyone has any questions in order to check their understanding and to get their feedback. You can also ask questions for the purpose of directing the tourists' attention to what you are about to explain. For example, suppose that you are going to explain how to use a foot-powered rice mill. To first capture the tourists' interest in the rice mill, you might start by asking, "Does anyone know what this is?" This is a more interesting and effective method than simply telling the tourists

what it is and speaking at length. You could also make a game out of this situation by saying, "The first person to guess what this thing is gets to be the first one to use it!" This makes your explanation more fun and enjoyable to the tourists. After explaining how to use the rice mill, you could finally allow the tourists to take turns using it, allowing them to feel how it moves and works.

Working with a Translator

Many village guides will have to spend at least one to two years working with a translator until they have the basic foreign language speaking skills necessary to do explanations on their own. To use a translator correctly takes some practice and skill. Here are some important ideas to keep in mind when using a translator.

Speak slowly: You must speak slowly and allow the translator to translate periodically as you speak. If you speak too fast, then the translator will likely forget a lot of what you say and not be able to translate your explanation completely.

Break between each idea or statement: After each main idea or statement, you should stop and let the translator translate. For example, suppose you want to explain the following information about a medicinal plant:

"This plant is called *yaa dee jep aew* in Lao. It is good for backaches and other soreness. Many villagers use it, especially older people. You can use the leaves to make a tea by crushing them and putting them into boiling water. You can also eat the leaves raw, which are quite bitter in taste."

If you said all of this at once, the translator might not remember each point and would not be able to translate all of your ideas to the tourists. Instead, it would be better if you explained each of the main points separately, pausing between each for translation, as follows:

"This plant is called *yaa dee jep aew* in Lao." – stop/translate

"It is good for backaches and other soreness. Many villagers use it, especially older people." – stop/translate

"You can use the leaves to make a tea by crushing them and putting them into boiling water." – stop/translate

"You can also eat the leaves raw. The leaves are quite bitter." – stop/translate

Speak to your audience, not to your translator: Even though you are speaking a language that the tourists may not understand, it is best to speak to them as if they *can* understand. This will make the tourists pay more attention to you and will make your explanation more interesting to them. *The tourists want to get to know you and want to hear your voice, so speak to them.*

Be confident and stay in the front of the group: Just because you cannot speak the tourists' language does not mean that you should walk behind the translator and the tourists. You have a lot of local knowledge that the tourists want to hear. If you stay to the back of the group, it will be difficult to stop and explain interesting things because everyone will be ahead of you. Hence, you should walk in front of the group, stopping to explain things when you see something of interest.



A village guide explaining to tourists using an English-speaking district guide



The translator can follow behind you, but just be sure to wait for him or her to catch up to you when you need help translating.

Practice with your translator: Before you take tourists on a tour, you should spend some time with the translator so that he understands what you will explain. This will make it easier for the translator to translate and will make the translation smoother and easier to listen to.

A note about culturally appropriate explanations

If you believe that something is culturally inappropriate to explain to the tourists, you are not obliged to explain it. For example, some villagers may feel shy to talk about certain issues, such as money, politics, war and sex. It is OK to tell a tourist that you would prefer not to talk about something. It is OK in such cases to speak directly to the tourists and to tell them that something is inappropriate to talk about.

Guiding by stories (storytelling)

Local stories are very interesting to tourists. By telling a story you can teach a tourist about village taboos, local beliefs, recent or ancient history, wildlife and forests and many other things. You can also make a tourist laugh or make them think about something important in life.

To tell a good story you must understand that there are three main elements to a story.

1. Paint the Scene (background): At the beginning of every story you must present the place and time of the story. You need to describe where it is and who the characters are.
2. Present the Problem: In every story there is a problem. There is something that happens that changes the characters. When you present the problem, the listener becomes excited and wants to know what will happen in the end.
3. Resolution to the Problem: This is where the storyteller explains the outcome of the story. This is the time when the listener learns the meaning of the story and the reason for telling it. It is very important to have a meaning for all stories. If your story does not have a meaning then the listener will not understand why you told it.

Here is an example, called the *Tale of Rocky Rhinoceros*, told during a trek in Savannakhet Province by Mr Bounthone Phommachak, an elder of Ban Nyang Village, Phin District:

(Paint the Picture) "Once upon a time, when the earth was young, before the rocks became baked hard by time, there were many animals in the forest and plains. During this time there was a race of people that were like gods. We don't know who they were, but they had special powers.

There was a son of one god that was to marry the daughter of another god. This event was so important that for the wedding ceremony the father of the groom invited all the animals to join the wedding parade that would go from the groom's house to the house of the bride. This required special magic just for this occasion, because on that day all the animals were allowed to fly and join the wedding parade in the sky.

The symbol of the wedding ceremony was the sesame seed. All the animals were invited to eat the sesame seeds that were prepared for the wedding feast."

(Problem) "However, two of the animals were late to join the wedding parade. They were the rhinoceros and the snake. They had to fly by themselves to go to the wedding feast. However, once the other animals had eaten all the sesame seeds it meant that the wedding ceremony was over and the magic was broken."

(Resolution) "All the sesame seeds were finished, and at that moment both the snake and the rhinoceros were flying at a great height. They both fell to the ground and died where they landed. They remain to this day as rock."

Today, we can see the 'rocky rhinoceros' on the trail between Ban Vong Sikaeo and Ban Nyang villages. The snake can be seen on another outcrop some distance away from the rhinoceros."



Rocky Rhinoceros

We can see from this example that by the end of the story, the listener understands why the rock is called "Rhinoceros Rock". As a guide, you should always relate a story to something that the tourists are seeing or doing on your trip. To improve this story and make it more fun for the tourists you could also add:

"So don't be late or else we might find you here next to the rhinoceros one day." Or "remember not to get too close to the rhino because if the magic wears off he will wake up and charge you."

Remember to be creative with your stories and to say something at the end to make the tourists think about its meaning or about something important on the tour.



Exercise #34

Choose a story that you know. Think about the meaning of the story and what you can say at the end to make sure it is fun or meaningful. Tell the story to your class.



Exercise #35

With an English speaking guide, practice telling the story to your class and having it translated. Take breaks often enough so that your translator can translate easily, but not too many breaks to make the story seem boring or too long.



Guiding by discussions (conversations)

A less formal and more common way of providing information to tourists is through discussions. Often you may not know what tourists want to know or what you should tell them, so engaging in a discussion will help you get across the information that they want to know without the pressure of having to explain everything from beginning to end. An appropriate time and location for group discussions is before and after meals, when the tourists are relaxing and thinking about what they have seen.

Individual Discussions vs. Group Discussions

Having discussions with individual tourists during your trip is a good way for you to get to know your guests and for them to learn about you. Some guests will have many questions to ask, while others will prefer to remain quiet and enjoy the experience. However, if during your discussion with an individual tourist a question is asked that you think would be important for everyone to understand, you should stop and explain the question and answer to everyone. This will make your job easier because you will not have to repeat yourself.

Consider this example:

You are walking and having a conversation with one of the tourists in your group, as the rest of the group follows a few meters behind you. You and the tourist are having a conversation about each other's families. As you are walking, the tourist sees a *taleo* on the side of the trail and asks you, "What is this?" You tell him (as you continue walking), "This is a *taleo*. It is used to keep the bad spirits out of the village and is a symbol that tells visitors not to enter." The other tourists in your group do not hear your explanation of the *taleo*. Some of them walk by the *taleo* and wonder what it is but you are too far ahead to ask questions.

What's wrong with this example? A *taleo* is something that all of the tourists should understand, but the guide explained it to only one tourist. The guide did not evaluate whether the question asked about the *taleo* was important for everyone to hear. Questions about the guide's family were not important to share with the group, but the question about the *taleo* was very important. It would have been better for the guide to stop and wait for the other tourists to gather around the *taleo*, and then explain it to everyone.

How to Answer Questions

It is important during a discussion that you try to understand what it is that the tourists want to know. You should give complete and detailed answers to questions. Yes/no answers are not informative and lead to more questions, which can make the discussion both confusing and boring. Consider the following example:



Discussions after meals is a good way to transfer your knowledge to tourists in a relaxed setting.



Something as important as a *taleo* should be explained to all tourists.

[You are discussing how to make *lao Lao*.]

The tourist asks "Can you make *lao Lao* in one day?"

Guide: "No."

Tourist: "Does it take one week?"

Guide: "No."

Tourist: "Well how long does it take?"

Guide: "It takes between 3-4 weeks."

Tourist: "What do you do first?"

Guide: "We first boil rice in a large pot."

Tourist: "What next?"

Guide: "We remove the water and add yeast."

Tourist: "What next?!"

What's wrong with this conversation? The tourist asked many questions but received very little information. The guide gave yes/no answers instead of detailed descriptions. The tourist feels tired and frustrated by asking so many questions. The guide should, instead, evaluate the tourist's first question and then respond with a detailed answer on how to make *lao Lao* as follows:

Tourist: "Can you make *lao Lao* in one day?"

Guide: "No. It takes about 3-4 weeks."

Tourist: "What do you do first?"

Guide: "We first boil rice in a large pot. After that we remove the rice and add yeast. We then put the rice and yeast mixture in a large container, like this one. After about two weeks, we then distill the rice wine using something like this."

Tourist: "How much do you sell a bottle of whiskey?"

Guide: "Here in the village we sell it for about 3,000 kip per bottle but in town we sell it for 5,000 per bottle."

This example is a lot more informative and easier for the tourist to understand than the first one. Notice that in the second example, the tourist asked fewer questions but received more information. So remember, provide detailed answers to the tourists' questions, and incorporate as many of the five senses into your answer as you can. In this case have the tourist touch the still, smell the rice mash and taste the *lao Lao* if possible.

Including Other Villagers in the Discussion

When holding a discussion it is important to include not only the tourists but other villagers who are present. Tourists want to get to know many people in the village. By including many people in your discussions—men, women, young and old—the tourists will have a better chance to understand the community. Consider this example:

[You are in your house with a group of tourists, explaining about your family life and your local livelihood. After you introduce your family and explain what each room in your house is for, you start a discussion.]

Tourist: "Does your sister go to school?"

Guide: "Yes, she goes to primary school in the morning."

Tourist: "What is your sister doing right now over there in the kitchen?"

Guide: "She is preparing food for the pigs."

Tourist: "How often does she do that?"

Guide: "She does it twice per day."



This discussion is fine, however, it can be made more interesting if the guide asks his sister to explain what she is doing. Tourists enjoy hearing everyone speak, not only the guide. By speaking with people directly, the tourist feels that their questions are answered better. The discussion can be improved as follows:

Tourist: "Does your sister go to school?"

Guide: "Yes, she goes to primary school in the morning."

Tourist: "What is your sister doing right now over there in the kitchen?"

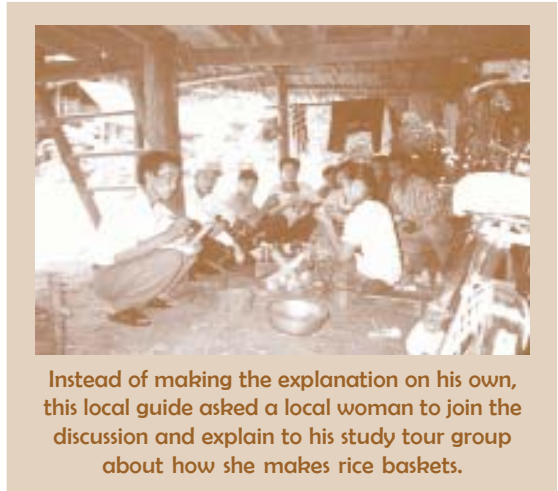
Guide: [Asks his sister to come over and explain what she's doing.]

Guide's Sister: "I'm preparing food for the pigs."

Tourist: "How often do you do that?"

Guide's Sister: "We prepare food for the pigs twice per day. I usually do it, but sometimes my other sister helps. I prepare it in the morning before I go to school and later on in the evening. In some other houses they only feed the pigs once per day and then let them find their own food in the evening."

As we can see in the second example, when the guide's sister speaks, she gives more information because she is the person who is actually responsible for the activity. She knows the subject better than her brother, the guide.



Instead of making the explanation on his own, this local guide asked a local woman to join the discussion and explain to his study tour group about how she makes rice baskets.

A note about culturally appropriate discussions

If you believe that something is culturally inappropriate to discuss, you are not obliged to discuss it. Tourists can ask some very direct questions that you may not feel comfortable answering. Just tell them that you would prefer not to talk about that and to ask a different question.



Exercise #36

What kinds of things would you prefer not to discuss? Make a list of some of these subjects. What would you say to a tourist if he or she would like to discuss one of these things?



Conclusion

This book has provided you with an introduction to local knowledge and its uses in tourism. It has presented various examples of local knowledge, of both women and men, that are used in tourism in Lao PDR. Hopefully, you have learned more about your own local knowledge and now understand some techniques that can be used to present this information to tourists.

It is important to understand, however, that this book is merely an introduction on the subject of interpreting local knowledge and is by no means a complete catalog of local knowledge in Laos, nor a comprehensive manual on guiding techniques. It is up to you, the local tour guide, to continue practicing your skills and developing your own understanding of local knowledge in your area or village. Studying and training are very important elements to becoming a competent tour guide, however, there is no substitute for experience. Thus, it is of great importance that you take the lessons learned from this book and put them into practice.

The authors of this book wish you good luck in presenting to tourists your unique local knowledge and experiences, and hope that by doing so we can protect and conserve the local heritage and knowledge base of the Lao PDR for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.