

A group of about ten children are walking away from the camera on a dirt path in a rural, arid landscape. They are dressed in simple, everyday clothing. In the background, there are some wooden structures and trees under a clear blue sky. The ground is dry and dusty.

Same same but different

Gene Lorca - Volunteer

I worked in the advertising world since graduating from college. My life wasn't exciting, despite my busy schedule, and tight deadlines with the clients. When I joined Child's Dream as a volunteer graphic designer, the world I left in Philippines came back to me with a new twist. After few months of sitting in front of my computer, Daniel told me to have a break from office work and join the Laos team and have my visa renewed at the same time. It was quite an exciting thought; I been to Laos once, but just in the capital, Vientiane, and the south of the country to me was like a black hole. I was excited, but clueless about what life is like there.

Before the sun broke, the team packed everything in the back of the truck and got ready for the trip. I decided to join Tha Wah and U yay (yay, means big in Thai) since we also have U lek (lek, means small). We drove to the south of Chiang Mai Province for several hours and then all the way to the most arid part of north-eastern Thailand. I had never had a long trip by land in my whole life so it was quite new to me. We traveled for many hours, but everywhere I turn my head, all I can see is the same. I feel a bit strange, and everything seems forever. We finally reached Chaiyaphum in the late afternoon and we stayed overnight at Tai's place and resumed the trip the following morning.

After few hours of driving, we stopped somewhere to shop for groceries. Everyone was doing frenzy shopping like it's going to be the end of the world. I was puzzled and they finally told me that I should get food from there, since it's twice or few times more expensive after we cross the border. After we shop, I was transferred to another truck and I joined a team of girls. When we arrived at Mukdahan, (Thai-Laos border immigration checkpoint), we quickly processed our

passport stamps and crossed the border. The super smooth highway on the side of Thailand instantly stops right at the border and is replaced with a crooked road on the other side. It's funny to think that both countries are only separated by border, yet are so different.

The following day we head south to Dongkhang Province to visit one of the schools supported by Child's Dream. The place is so remote and there's no electricity in the area and the whole place is pitch black, and everything stops after the sunset and the whole village vanishes into darkness in the middle of the jungle. I thought that was the worst place we had visited so far, but when we got further down south very close to the Cambodian border, in the school situated on an island in the middle of the Mekong River, the situation was rather worse. The students have to paddle their boats to go to school every day, going back and forth to neighbouring islands where they live. The situation seems very hard but its worse during rainy season since the river is high and the current is stronger and sometimes it's impossible to cross. It's so inspiring to see them paddling their boats every day, just to go to school despite the harsh weather and environment.

Mainly, our visit in South Laos was to do follow ups on school construction and monitor progress and also to visit the Ministry of Education office to help identify schools in the remote areas that are most needy. Travelling everyday under blistering heat of the sun and Mars-like environment is not a joke; I remember calling that place "Mars", because the soil is so red and dusty. It must be hard for kids to walk every day to school during the rainy summer season. Despite the language barrier between me and the locals, I managed to gather information from them with the help of our field coordinator. Some students told us that they would rather harvest coffee and earn a small amount of cash and help their parents than go to school. It's so sad to think that education is the least priority for them; maybe if I were in their situation I probably would do the same thing.

The most exciting part of the trip was during the last couple of days when we visited the Ministry of Education in Savannakhet. We visited a small village where I have to join the local guys for a drink. For Lao people, drinking rice whiskey at social gatherings is very common; even in a blazing heat of the day on an empty stomach is quite normal. After few hours gulping unlimited shots of rice whiskey with the villagers, they finally serve lunch. We had boiled wild flower from the jungle and sticky rice and a bowl of atomic (too spicy and almost toxic) chili sauce. After we ate lunch, we headed to the next village to attend a ceremony and the villagers once again welcome us with another celebration. They perform a Buddhist chanting ceremony and we had another lunch and more drinks.

After the ceremony, I can feel that my tummy is boiling; I know something wrong is going happen. We drove to the nearest city to get some materials for school construction and my stomach was getting worse. I never told anyone since I thought it would just go away after a while. When we arrived at the hardware store, the owner offered me a drink, but I refused everything. He turned

around and grabbed a jar filled with dead swallow soaked in whiskey and he told me to give it a try. He told me that if I drink one shot each day, it will prevent certain illnesses and it is also an aphrodisiac. When I saw the jar my tummy turned upside-down and made me feel even sicker. It reminded me of those jars being displayed in science lab back in high school with dead fetuses and preserved animals. I felt so disgusted and wanted to run away since the guy was so pushy and wanted me to have a shot, but I guess my NO was faster than a speeding bullet and he eventually stopped. After we came back to the hotel, we had a dinner and I had an intimate night with the toilet until dawn.



Dead swallow soaked in whiskey



Typical scenery in South Laos



The students have to paddle their boats to go to school every day