

CAMBODIA had to become one of our favorite countries after our 2-month tourist visa expired. We began making one-day trips to the Cambodian border, which took 4 hours by bus each way. We tried to work out our visas while still back in Los Angeles, but our agency advised us to initiate the process after we arrive in Bangkok. We got a two-month tourist visa from the Thai Embassy in LA, but after that we did these one-day visa runs for one-month tourist visas. Anything more would've required us to go beyond the border to the capital, and spend 2 or more days waiting for a 2-month tourist visa from the Thai Embassy; but, our school schedule would've suffered, and we didn't want to miss any days, especially during the critical and foundational period of our language learning. The children didn't like having to wake up at 5:30AM for these visa trips, but we grew to enjoy these family affairs, especially after we figured out that we can reserve in advance the first floor "suite" of the tour bus all to ourselves at no extra cost! [Check out finedaytour.com]

LAOS was the recommended by our Thai church staff for our final visa run. For this special visa, we had to go to the Thai Embassy (June 2-7, 2006), and ended up missing three days of school. There was no 2-day holiday for our school that did not coincide with a Thai holiday for which the Thai Embassy would also be closed. The Cambodian border is closer, but the Thai Embassy is in its capital, which is farther away. Our family had a great time in this trip.

Lao Airlines operates a small propeller plane from Bangkok to Vientiane, and even though the counter ladies gave us quieter front row seats, it was very loud. The children were used to all-day intercontinental flights from the past year and were disappointed to hear after only an hour that we had to prepare for landing. But, the rest of our five-day stay in Laos was relaxing. We only had to be there for the weekday when the Embassy would be open, but went early for the weekend to make the most of the trip. While there wasn't much to do, even a department mall to visit, we had plenty of time for each other.

Laotians were very easy going and pleasant, just as I heard and read about, but contrary to my expectations in a communist or socialist country. Religious expression is permitted, as long as no one tries to convert anybody. The food was great, and we even went bowling for cheap (\$1.75 for three of us, including shoes and socks). It was a totally modern facility, complete with computerized scoring and everything! Taxis were harder to come by, because they were actually tuk-tuks or three wheeled motorcycles modified to pull carts with two benches; each fare had to be negotiated and we ended up paying less than half of what we did on our first day of ignorance.