

## Without water or ATM card in Laos, but plenty of beauty

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LUANG PRABANG, LAOS -- I've hit a bit of a rough patch in my travels.

Before leaving home, it was hard to imagine ever having an off day. How could it be possible when gallivanting around the world, from country to country, taking in the sights and culture?

Well, all it takes is the theft of a bank card the day before hitting the most remote country on the route through Southeast Asia. I'm responsible and generally over-cautious -- especially when it comes to valuables -- so how this happened is still beyond me. Since then, I've generally been in a sour mood, with only a few bright spots, like meeting a group of new friends on the three-day slow boat trip from Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang and a trip to Kuang Si waterfall to keep my spirits elevated.

The process to get a new card has been more difficult than expected since I arrived in the country. It took three barely audible Skype phone calls to the bank just to get my card frozen, before learning that a new one can't be sent anywhere but to my permanent address in Stamford or an international Citibank branch in Laos. Tough luck finding one of those.

The difficulty has opened up my eyes to the stark differences between Thailand and Laos, despite such proximity to one another. Although the vast majority of countries in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia included) are considered "third world" or "developing nations," it appears to be an extremely broad term about which I'm interested in learning more. From what I have seen and experienced in Laos thus far, Thailand is the vastly more developed of the developing nations.

Disappointing but true: My international banking representative did not know that Laos was in Southeast Asia, let alone that it was a country. Once that was cleared up, it was on to finding a permanent address to which my family could mail a new ATM card. It didn't take long to learn that Lao postal services are infrequent and unreliable and that it could take upward of a month to get my card.

As of now, my card is en route from Stamford to the [U.S. Embassy](#) in Hanoi, Vietnam, and will take almost two weeks to get there, even in priority mail.

In addition to the lesser-developed postal service, the water crisis during Southeast Asia's dry season is much more dire here than in Thailand. For the past two days, our \$3 hostel and the restaurants,



markets and guest houses around Luang Prabang have been without water, making the few Western toilets unflushable and showering impossible.

Laos sees equally as little rain as Thailand during the dry season, which generally lasts from November to March, but has yet to find a developed way to cope with the shortage.

After only four days in Laos, I found poverty in the country is also much more evident than it was in Thailand. It is much more common to see children begging on the streets of Laos than it was in Thailand, and giving you the slightest bit of aid, they will immediately ask you for a "tip, money, tip" for their help.

While the seeming lack of development makes it harder for a Westerner to adjust, it does have its advantages. Laos is by far more beautiful than Thailand, with lush mountains overlooking the quaint city of Luang Prabang along the Mekong River. There are three stunning waterfalls within hours of one another, and the trucks and cabs that pollute Bangkok are replaced with bicycles in Luang Prabang. Temples are on every corner, and monks in the city are excited to teach you and practice their English.

Within the next few weeks, we'll quickly travel through two more cities in Laos before meeting my ATM card in Vietnam. In the meantime, I'm taking the limited funds in stride. Things happen, and eventually it all gets sorted.

And who knows? What I'm saving now could lead me somewhere new or add more time for somewhere else.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. For photos from the Chiang Mai jungle trek, visit her blog, *Passport: The World*, on The Advocate Web site.

To read Sarah's blog, go to <http://blog.ctnews.com/lipman/>.

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