

The alternate universe of Vang Vieng

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VANG VIENG, LAOS -- Over the past month and a half, I've gone through several bouts of traveler's guilt. It's inevitable when on the road for so long, and it definitely feels worse in some cities than in others.

Vang Vieng, the most common stop in Laos for tourists, is one of those cities.

The best way I can describe Vang Vieng is to ask readers to imagine the alternate universes seen in cartoons -- the kind where the protagonist walks down a deserted street with warped clocks and bizarre doors. Now replace the warped clocks with random couches and televisions playing episodes of "Friends" and "Family Guy."

Vang Vieng, like many of the islands I encountered in Thailand (Koh Phangan is another example), is a place that exists solely on the profits made from Western tourists looking for a party. Talking to other travelers, I found not too many seem to have a problem with the concept, but for some reason it sits a bit funny with me.

The main attraction in Vang Vieng is to hire a túk-túk for 10 minutes up the main road to the river for tubing. Little did I know "tubing" is some secret backpacker's code for a Southeast Asian spring-break-style party, and no one actually rents a tube. I'm a young 20-something, still fairly fresh out of college, so I can appreciate a good party now and then. But what I've seen at the river in Vang Vieng is unlike anything I've ever encountered.

There are backpackers everywhere, clad in skimpy bathing suits and drinking Lao whiskey out of buckets, with remixed techno versions of Western pop songs blaring out of speakers. Along the river are zip wires, water slides and swings for people to jump from into the water to get them from bar to bar.

Many travelers stay in Vang Vieng for well over a week, doing the same thing day after day. Some even remain in the city for months at a time, picking up odd jobs as bartenders and party promoters so they can live and drink for free.

The backdrop for the huge rave is beautiful, but I assume many don't put down their drinks long enough to notice. The mountains loom large over the river and are a lush green. I don't think many of the partygoers take notice of the Lao people running the party either. Under stairs are often elder Lao women making \$1 sandwiches for those who need to sober up. And up above, school-aged children are running the swings and slides that people race to go on.



We spent about four days in Vang Vieng with some friends we made en route to Laos. After experiencing some of the insanity myself, I took the rest of the time off to get an outside perspective. It was fun, but what really intrigued me was being in the minority -- sober and not understanding the point of "tubing" and ready to leave after two days.

Perched at the top of the river, I watched as people along the banks lost their minds in alcohol and who knows what else. People stumble in and out of the water, and it's not uncommon to see someone bandaged up because of a fall or mishap on one of the zip wires.

And as I watched, I felt guilty.

The sight was not one that was enriching my travels and my mind, but rather one that distracts from the very things about which I want to learn. I was seeing a crazier version of "MTV Spring Break," as opposed to the sunrise offerings for the Buddhist monks. I was seeing children who will never go to school pouring beverages and looking for loose money on the floors of bars.

If we tourists continue to fuel these types of parties as the sole source of revenue such areas, how can Laos, or any country whose main industry is tourism, ever continue to develop and move up from the class of "third world" countries to "second world?"

Not every single thing I do while traveling needs to have a lesson or some sort of historical perspective behind it. Sometimes it's OK to enjoy a good party and not feel bad about it. But other times, it makes me wonder if this type of activity gives Western travelers a bad reputation as spoiled, partying alcoholics. It's a stereotype and a generalization, but after the last few days, it's one I'm not shy to make.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. 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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