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BON VOYAGE

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Four Thousand Islands of paradise

Ryandall Lim unwinds at idyllic Si Phan Don in Laos



WHILE travelling down the length of Laos, I discovered war-torn temples, dramatic karst mountains and thundering waterfalls.

I also stepped into a nest of army ants, fell off my motorcycle, got lost and endured bumpy and nauseating rides with chain-smoking locals, goods and quacking ducks all packed like sardines in songthaews (passenger mini-vans).

After two weeks of off-the-beaten-track adventures, I was looking forward to relaxing at Si Phan Don, or Four Thousand Islands, at the southernmost tip of the country.

The archipelago comprises thousands of big islands, tiny islets and minute sandbars that span 14km across the widest part of the 4,350km-long mighty Mekong River.

Life is so laidback in this tranquil paradise that everything seems to slow down on the inhabited islands.

Most visitors here make their way to the biggest island, Don Khong, or the twin islands of Don Det and Don Khon that are connected by the French Bridge.

To get to Don Det, I hopped on a boat at Ban Nakasang, one of several small riverside towns where boats depart for the different islands.

Once the boat filled up with passengers, a young boatman steered it along.



Raging rapids of Tat Somphamit. PHOTO: RYANDALL LIM

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A small temple complex on Don Khon. PHOTOS: RYANDALL LIM

Four Thousand Islands of paradise

CONTINUED FROM D7

We navigated a river bend before entering a tributary, and then passed dozens of islets that looked like large floating bushes. Occasionally, noisy motorised fishing boats jetted past, sending small rippling waves that rocked our vessel slightly. It was as if the serene river, with its hypnotic ripples and green islands, was telling us to slow down.

Lazy island life

Don Det has a slightly hippy vibe, with its concentration of bars and restaurants at the main village of Ban Hua Det in the north. Tourists — mostly foreigners — arrive at the village's pier and stay at guesthouses within the vicinity. But a singular, sandy path leads to a charming rural area with buffaloes, pigs and ducks roaming wild and children playing in padi fields bordered by coconut trees. I found the main islands of Don Khong, Don Det and Don Khon



A picture-postcard Don Det sunrise.

perfect havens for a blissful respite from busy city life. There were hammocks tied to the veranda beams of budget chalets or between trees facing the Mekong that promised to lull you to sleep as they swayed gently in the breeze; soft reggae music streamed from the few basic bars to ease you

into a relaxed state of mind; and eateries with comfy recliner chairs beckoned you to sit back and while away your time with re-runs of American sitcom Friends.

Si Phan Don's languid island life is addictive, even for energetic explorers on a mission to check items off their itineraries. I met travellers who were so charmed by the lethargic rhythm of island life and the picturesque views that they extended their stay to indulge in a few more days of hammock-rocking.

For thrill-seekers, there was no lack of action-packed activities such as river tubing, kayaking, cycling and trekking to nearby waterfalls.

Island exploration

But I managed to pry myself away from the comfort of it to explore the area for half a day on foot. From my no-frills bungalow on Don Det, I walked past several villages and padi fields and crossed the French Bridge to Don Khon, where I discovered an old loco-

motive and remnants of a railway track built by French colonialists in the late 19th century to link the two islands.

From there, a 30-minute stroll along the river through the compounds of a small temple and a field of towering twines led me to a kitschy park.

I paid 35,000 kip (\$5.50) to enter it and get a spectacular view of a set of raging rapids called Tat Sompamit.

The locals call these rapids Li Phi, which means "spirit trap", believed to entrap wandering bad spirits "washed" down the river. Hence, you will never see locals swimming in the rock pools despite how refreshing the water looks.

Further down, past a near-empty café with pavilions that overhang a gentle cliff, a picturesque curved sandy beach played host to several bikini-clad Caucasians sunbathing.

After my mini excursion, I headed back to my bungalow to indulge in my new pastime of doing nothing.

Unless you count swaying in my hammock by the lazy Mekong as something.

GUIDELINES

I flew to Bangkok on AirAsia and took a bus to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Then I travelled by bus and songthaew (mini-van) to Pakse, where I bought a bus-boat combination ticket (70,000 kip/3 hours) to Don Det via Ban Nakasang. Lao Airlines offers direct flights from Bangkok to Pakse.

The best time to visit Si Phan Don is during the cool, dry season (November to January). Bring a sweater as it can get chilly by the river at night.

Don Det is noisier and more commercialised than the other islands, but has convenience stores and money-changers. Exchange rates on the islands are generally poor, so change money at Ban Nakasang. There are no banks or ATMs on Don Det and Don Khon.

Lao kip, Thai baht and US dollars are accepted in Laos, though in small villages, only the kip is used.

On Don Det, stay on the east coast (but slightly south of the main pier to avoid the sometimes noisy bars) for great sunrise views.

Bring a torch to use at night as the paths are unmarked and unit.

Do not climb onto boulders or stray beyond warning signs at Tat Sompamit. Some rocks are loose, slippery and dangerous.

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