



JULY 11, 2012

WAITER, THERE'S A FROG IN MY SOUP: HOW TO LOOK LIKE A LOCAL IN LAOS



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By **Erik R. Trinidad** | July 11, 2012

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If you're going to the Southeast Asian country of Laos, you're most likely going to stick out like a sore thumb if you don't know how to fit in. On my own travels through Laos, I already blended in, to an extent, being an American of Filipino descent and having similar physical features as a Laotian.

However, it's not all about looks. To really be like a Laotian, regardless of what you look like, it's more about your behavior and your knowledge of Laotian culture that will surprise the locals with how much you know about their country. Here are some travel tips based on my time in Laos.

Talk the talk

Firstly, you must learn the local language if you're going to try and blend in. The language of Lao may not look easy — its written alphabet of squiggly lines isn't remotely similar to our English one — but if you know a few key speaking phrases beyond *Suam yuu sai?* (Where is the toilet?),

you'll be able to get into conversations with locals in no time.

Here are a few examples:



Sabaai-dii.

Aakaat dii maen baw?

Hello.

Nice weather we're having.

Koil bor dai deum beer pen pha jum, tair tha koil dai deum koil mug deum Dos Equis.

I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis.

Know the places you'll go

So what if landlocked Laos doesn't have coastal beaches, as do Thailand and Vietnam? There are plenty of places to cool down when the tropical heat gets unbearable. One such place is a beautiful swimming hole is located in Kuang Si, amid picturesque waterfalls in the



middle of the jungle. For a little more active relaxation away from the international party scene, you can go tubing down the Nam Song River in Vang Vieng. Or, if you want to walk in peace amongst meditating monks, head to Luang Prabang, with its beautiful temples adorning the tranquil and romantic banks of the Mekong River.

Watch your step

If you do a little light research, you'll see that Laos was part of the battlefield during the Vietnam War — and some areas are still littered with land mines. That shouldn't scare you off from going to Laos; the minefields are mostly in the Xieng Khouang province in the north, and are clearly marked with plenty of warning signs. If anything, telling people you're going to a country with active landmines will only make you appear more adventurous.



Eat local, eat Laotian

In Laos, eating sticky rice with your hands is a daily affair, so make sure your hands are clean. But sticky rice isn't the only Laotian delicacy. Not surprisingly, local cuisine is similar to that of neighboring Thailand and Vietnam, so you'll find noodle dishes, like a local rendition of



Vietnamese *pho*. You'll also find *laap* — which many regard as the national dish of Laos — a fresh green salad topped with morsels of meat or fish, and seasoned with lime juice, assorted herbs, and vegetables. If you're a little more daring with your food choices, you might try a frog in your soup — *tom yam gop* — which you can order by name. If it doesn't go down well, you already know how to tell them which beer you prefer if you need help washing it down.

Erik Trinidad is an author, writer, designer, food critic, world traveler, and all-around "Freelance Renaissance Man," whose work can be seen on The Huffington Post, Food Network/Cooking Channel, and Discovery.com, as well as on his own travel and food sites, The Global Trip and Fancy Fast Food. Follow him on Twitter @theglobaltrip and @fancyfastfood; on facebook.com/theglobaltrip and facebook.com/fancyfastfood; youtube.com/theglobaltrip and youtube.com/fancyfastfood and at "theglobaltrip" on Instagram.

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