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Mythical Majical Laos course update



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Press Clippings

Laos Kingdom course design update from Maddess

July 15 2010 - Race Dates Sept 22-26

Magical Laos – Land of Mystery - Almost mythical - Epic scenery – What more can you ask for...

Talking about a hot destination and we don't mean temperature, but just a stunning and cool place to hang out, the sleepy laid back town of Luong Prabang airport staff are a pleasant surprise unlike big cities of Hong Kong or Hanoi.



After arrival, without US\$ for the visa (had HK & Vietnam currency with me) immigration staff said, "No problem, just walk past immigration and there is a bank machine on the outside of the airport". Too funny, as I cleared customs without even showing my passport. Guess they knew I wasn't going anywhere but gives you an idea of how laid back the place is.



From the airport it's around a 2-hour bus road with flat good roads to the small village we're sleeping overnight. Unlike Vietnam this bus won't be stopping for anything as going direct. We could take bus in the morning, but we figure nobody likes going for long bus rides in the morning, then starting a marathon immediately on tight legs, so better just to get the traveling out of the way and wake up with the start line at your feet. This way we can also start early and take advantage of the morning cooler temperatures.



With the beginning of dirt roads in the mountain area (elevation around 300m) the long course 100km runners will do a quick flat out and back along a river bank trail nestled in the trees and sheltered from any sunlight which is quite pleasant covering a total of around 12 km before arriving back at the starting location that the 50km runners would have left earlier. The next 30 km is the same route for everyone with the first 5km a gradual uphill climb that 4 wheel drives can drive up (no stairs don't worry) with the scenic valley opening up below you. The elevation of the highest point goes up to around 1100 – 1200m and then the road follows a mountain ridge line staying between 900-1100m for 10-15km.



Quite incredible experience with the odd curious villager walking by carrying loads on their backs. You'll encounter villages along the way with curious kids coming out wanting to play and waving at you very different than neighbouring Vietnam. Not sure if it's just because they are not used to seeing tourists and not sure what to do or they are just friendlier than others, but regardless very pleasant villagers.

As the dirt road follows the mountain ridge rolling hills for next 25km all the small hills are runnable. There are a couple hills kind of steep, but as a jeep can drive up you get the idea that it's doable if you train for it. If you don't train on hills you'll probably be walking these 200-300m long hills. If anything we'd probably encourage you not to run these small hills and just hike them taking in the scenery until the track levels out for easier running. The valley views will inspire you too keep going until you finish the day one leg.



We were debating on shortening the day one route for the shorter group, as usually don't like stages longer than 20-25km, but it would have meant staying at a smaller village that just wasn't as nice after checking out the insides of a few houses plus fewer amenities. Going the extra few kilometers is worth it as they have 2 little snack shops selling biscuits, soda drinks, and some local Laos things to munch on, plus a few more houses to choose from. There will be plenty of pineapple and bananas at the finish as with water.

Getting water ahead of time to the checkpoints every 10km or less will be a bit of an issue for us, but not too worry we'll get it done by motorbike. The problem we might face as organizers is if it is raining or wet is only motorbikes possibly can get up the dirt road, which could pose a problem for us carrying your all your luggage. Because of this for day 1 only, we are thinking of

changing this first section into "carry your own clothes/food" section and drive your luggage around to meet you on day 2. We'll confirm this shortly as we don't want to have you worrying about your luggage. But as mentioned if we feel it "could" be an issue transporting your luggage then we'll give you at least 30 days notice and tell you that you'll be expected to carry an extra shirt/shorts for the day one night village. Of course a few Mitsubishi Pajeros could solve the problem, but easier said than done trying to rent them in the middle of Laos...



There are some easier locations that we surveyed logistically to get luggage around on the course, but when we found this area, it was love at first site and too good to pass up.

There is food to be purchased at the villages, but no restaurants. Saying that Laos is the kind of place when you're in the middle of nowhere locals are more than willing to invite you to their place to have a seat if you need it. We would recommend bringing freeze dried food as everyone has hot water and just much easier as very few choices. Even finding noodles and a bowl was a headache in one of the villages.



You really only need 1 spare pair of shorts, 1 extra shirt, (flip flops/sandals optional as many just go barefoot). There is a equipment list posted to the Laos page already you can read. The village houses will have a sleeping mat to sleep on (bamboo floors) plus a small pillow for you and a mosquito net. They also have blankets if you need so wouldn't worry about bringing one unless you want to bring a very lightweight sleeping bag.



Staying in Laos for any length of time, you'll be convinced the locals have managed to alter the stress / peace continuum. It just seems nothing bothers them which is amazing in a place where poverty is so wide spread. Either the NGOs have made a big difference or they just know things will get better and are not complaining due to food grown locally close to them and everyone living quite a healthy lifestyle by walking everywhere.

After running day 1, the village you'll be staying really is in the middle of nowhere. We are talking no electricity (well they do have a generator for night time movies in 1 building for everyone), but we didn't see anything in other houses. When asking about showers we were told everyone goes down to the river to swim and shower. We didn't get to the river, but as everyone seemed quite clean, it must be close. This village was where I had one of my best sleeps. Not sure why, but probably due to being so dark at night and quiet. Incredible looking up at night and seeing galaxy after galaxy of stars as it has been quite a while where I could look up and see something like that.



When you wake up for the day 2 run the plan is too start early, as this will be the long day for the 100k group covering close to 48k. Shorter for the 50k group as 25k on day 2. Plan is to start by 7am and take advantage of the morning cool temperatures. As you'll be at 900 -1000m in elevation already, you'll be running at this elevation for a while on the mountain top ridge line traveling for the next 25k passing thru several local Lao villages on the dirt track. The long will go 12km out mostly flat with a few rolling hills, then turn North heading downhill on a single track trail dirt road for 3km towards a village for an out and back. Trust me, the villagers will be quite surprised to see you here as I attracted around 40 kids in a matter of 10 minutes being there. Getting back will be a bit of an uphill for a few hundred meters before leveling out which is nothing you can't handle as you'll see local women carrying their kids up this trail to the main dirt road.



Back on the same road as the 50k runners the long group will go another 5 km on the dirt road before taking another south turn at a 3 way junction and heading out an estimated 9km passing a few villages before turning back to the same junction you came from. Then again continuing the same dirt road as the 50k runners to the end of the road which eventually hits a cement road where the finish will be. The last 10km should be much easier with much smaller hills too finish off on a high with lots of running and little hiking depending on your goal and energy levels.



Plenty of pineapple, bananas and other fruit will be available at this finish line as with day one finish with water.



There are some villages in this area, but not really suitable for a group so we've decided to transport you 20km by small little minibuses (6-8 people per bus) 40-45 minutes down the main cement road to a bigger village with larger houses, more restaurants, shops, etc. Saying that there still isn't many choices, but you'll get the idea when you see it. Beautiful views along the road with many more villages you'll be passing thru seeing the local chickens, cows, kids, farmers, etc to keep you entertained. As day one you'll be staying in someones house with approximately 8 people per house on wide open floors with the locals looking after you. Don't worry the army has been involved in choosing the houses for you, so you're in good hands. Again choices to use freeze dried food too just add hot water will be the easiest, unless you want to venture out and see what kind of food you can find. You could walk 100m or up to 1 km as a long village.

Day 3 – Waking up early around 5am, we'll travel 40km by road which should take no more than 1 hour and will start at the Pha Tok Caves. These are enormous multi-levelled caves set in limestone cliffs, where villagers hid out during the Second Indochina War. There is a rickety ladder going in which everyone will be able to use to access the caves before the race for some fast photos before starting the race outside of the caves.

Starting from the caves with a short 500m road run towards a jungle single track turn you'll cross

a short river (ankle deep) and run thru a local rice paddy field for some great views of limestone mountains surrounding the area. You wont be able to run too fast thru the paddies without destroying all the hard work the locals put into designing the little ledges too keep the water in, so you'll have to be extra careful for this 1km or so stretch.

We have an option too add a little more distance on this day and run up thru some further jungle single track towards a stunning waterfall. This will be an option if the runners still want longer distance added depending on the legs after 2 days of racing. After doing the small loop out and back you'll then be on the cement road for the last 2 km to Nong Khiaw (flat and fast with great views of limestone cliffs next to you) where the boats will be waiting at the finish area next too restaurants for some well earned food. Day 3 short day 7 - 10 km. For the short category that means day 1 - 30k, day 2 - 25k and day 3 - 6k for total 61km. So guess we should stop calling it the "50km" category and call it the 61km category!!! Could be an extra 2km more if waterfall thrown in. For the longer category distances will be day 1 - 42 km, day 2 - 49km and 9 km on day 3 for 100km.

The boats that do the river trips have a maximum capacity of around 15-16 people (see pic on our website) so we're looking at hiring around 4 boats to take everyone down stream to relax and enjoy the scenery instead of driving by bus. Boat will take under 5 hours (they told me 4+ in September when the rains are finishing and river levels are much higher, compared to 5 hour bus ride on windy road with good scenery. The river will have better scenery so idea is too finish race early and enjoy the beautiful boat road that goes all the way into the heart of Luong Prabang. Then a short 5-10 minute taxi ride to the Villa Santi Resort & Spa to relax and enjoy the unique charm of original royal Lao hospitality in the World Herryitage site of Luang Phabang. The resort sits in a historic century old royal mansion renovated into a hotel with an outdoor swimming pool and bar.

After cleaning up at the hotel we'll have the official dinner awards followed by some hard earned Lao beer. Participants are free to do whatever they want and can chill or take a tuk tuk into town to wonder around if they choose. We'd recommend just staying at the hotel and taking it in too just relax as it is quite nice. Next morning bus ride to airport for flight to Hanoi (for those on the chartered flight to HK) with a 1 hour stop-over and immediately catching the flight to HK.

After this you'll be in prime shape for upcoming races in the fall.

Michael Maddess
Race Director & Course Designer
www.actionasiaevents.com

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