

Backpacking in Southeast Asia

By Lindsey Payne

Editor's Note: Before moving back to Indiana from California, Lindsey Payne went on a three-month backpacking trip to Southeast Asia. The Comet asked the Carroll County native to write about her experiences and tell why she thinks back-

packing is the way to travel. Here is her story.

The other day I was teaching my students about the nitrogen cycle and using elephant dung as an example. I soon found myself telling them about an elephant festival I attended in Asia. As I talked about my re-

cent trip, I watched my students' faces form shocked expressions. At that point I realized that not everyone thinks traveling with a backpack halfway around the world for three months is normal. Having previously wandered around in Tanzania, Namibia, Ecuador, and the Philippines, in January of '07 I decided it was time to go again. So I was off to SE Asia and the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

My parents don't argue with my choice of destination anymore. Yet, they were surprised to learn that there is a whole contingent of "weirdos" all over the world that do this activity for fun. What I mean by that is they fill a large pack with about three changes of clothes, a few good books, a travel guide and a camera, and head out to the unknown.

Backpackers come from everywhere, for all reasons. It seems some are running away from a boring life back home while others just can't seem to get enough of the immersion in other cultures. There is an unwritten code among the infrequently showered few. For example, strangers you meet along the way will become your friends - sharing laughs, life-changing moments and even a room of bunk beds. These new comrades will entertain you through 14-hour train rides and offer you safety in the buddy system, but in the end, you may never see your traveling friends again.

What I love so much about backpacker traveling is that you have the absolute freedom of deciding your every move. Perhaps you fall in love with Vietnam and stay three weeks longer than expected, foregoing the plan to end your trip on the beaches of Thailand. Or, maybe it's a sign at the border crossing of Laos for the "Elephant Festival," so you ride a cargo boat for seven hours, traveling up the Mekong River to witness the event. You have no itinerary, no curfew, just a budget. A small budget in SE Asia goes a long way. Skipping the 5-star hotels and expensive cuisine, you can live comfortably on \$15 a day.

While backpacking is generally a glorious experience, there are hardships. As a backpacker in developing countries, you forego the chartered buses and tour guides and join the masses. No other aspect of backpacking requires more patience than transportation. One might find herself in the midst of an 11-hour bus trip broken down on the dirt roads of Laos, or crammed for seven hours into a cargo boat on a seat bench with enough leg room for a two-year-old. On the positive side, you can rent a motorbike and transport yourself through the countryside for a mere \$6 a day - just be sure to bring an extra tire!



Elephant Festival

Lindsey Payne attended the First Annual Elephant Festival in Laos. The festival was held to honor the country's working elephants and their mahouts (trainers). Lindsey is pictured feeding sugarcane to the "Elephant of the Year." Photo provided

And, if you thought port-a-potties were a bit uncomfortable then you'd be horrified by the squat potty - small hole in the ground, no toilet paper, need I say more?

The language barrier can also be challenging, especially when you genuinely would like to learn more about cultural norms.

But nothing is worse than food poisoning. An adventurous eater in no health coded, open-air markets, there isn't too much I won't try - fried grubs, scorpion wine. Unfortunately, I did learn a bit of a lesson while kayaking in Vietnam. I ate fresh mussels and got horrific food poisoning, spending the next few days with explosive urges

from all ends of the spectrum!

At this point many ask, "Why on Earth do you do this?" It's the moments you may never have the opportunity to experience again, and well, they make for great stories! It's hearing from a local that peddling out to see the sunrise over the temple of Angkor Wat will change your life, renting the bike, and then finding out it's true.

It's rising at 6 a.m. to see the monks of Luang Prabang file out of their temples in swirling colors of orange and yellow to collect alms from the town folk.

It's homestays with families you've never met and will most likely never see again.

And, how many would love the opportunity to ride an elephant or play Indiana Jones, scaling archeological ruins in the middle of a Cambodian jungle?

It's also the resolve of the people - a 70-pound child on a bicycle pulling a cart with two large tourists up Sam Mountain to view the sunset because that is his income for the week.

It's the comedy of a 6'6" Scotsman having a drink in the streets of Saigon at a miniature table and chairs.

It's driving a motorbike through the countryside of Thailand with forest fires burning alongside the road.

These opportunities I've had to live and play in different cultures have changed me forever. I have a very deep appreciation for all parts of this world, big and small. I strongly encourage others to get out of their comfort zones, backpack and open up to a world beyond belief, or maybe just let me come share my memories with you!



Mighty Russian motorbike

Lindsey Payne and a fellow backpacker, Adam Smith from Scotland, rented this old Russian motorbike for a trip from Hanoi to the Northern Regions of Vietnam. The bike broke down and they only made it to Cat Ba Island about a quarter of the way. They still considered it an amazing journey. Photo provided



Street cooking

Women in Southeast Asia cook food on the streets to sell to locals and tourists. The cost varies from 25 cents to \$2.00. Lindsey Payne said she has sampled the food, never knowing what she was eating. This photo was taken in Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo provided



Saigon, Vietnam

On the streets of Saigon, Vietnam, many stop for food, drinks and the company of others. The tables and chairs seem like miniatures for tourists, but are about the right size for the Vietnamese. Photo provided

Lindsey Payne Bio

Education - 1996 graduate of Carroll High School; undergraduate degree in biology from DePauw University; Teaching Credential and Master's of Education

Occupation - High school science teacher at Lafayette Jeff High School

Family - Parents are Jim and Barb Payne of rural Bringham

Travels: Tanzania, East Africa; Namibia, South Africa; Ecuador, the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam

Programs: Available to give programs to schools, organizations, and churches. Call (949) 357-4514 or email lb-payne78@gmail.com

Delphi American Legion Post #75
will host a
**Delphi City Candidate
Public Forum**
for the upcoming November city election
Tuesday, Oct. 9 from 7-9pm
Free and open to the public
All the slated candidates have been invited.
• Refreshments will be served •

Fun-Cash & Prizes

Participate in Moonlight Madness Events!
A Flora Community Club event
Saturday, Oct. 6th

Chili Cook-Off Contest

Enter your favorite recipe to win \$50 and bragging rights!
2 Categories - Hot & Mild. Pick up Rules & Entries at IGA. NON PROFESSIONALS ONLY.

Scarecrow Contest

Open to everyone. Be creative - can be made from any material but must be free standing and no more than 6' tall. All entries should be taken to Holly's Hair Hut between 2:00 & 4:00 Saturday Oct. 6th.
\$100 1st Prize, \$50 2nd Prize (All above mentioned prizes awarded in Shop Flora 1st Certificates redeemable at any Flora Business.)

BINGO

with lots of prizes, will be played for a small fee in the Center Street Grill building 5:00 - 9:00.

Art Show

All Local Talents are invited to bring all mediums to share in an art display at the Center Street Grill building.
Contact Janice 967-4414 or Alice 967-3928.

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