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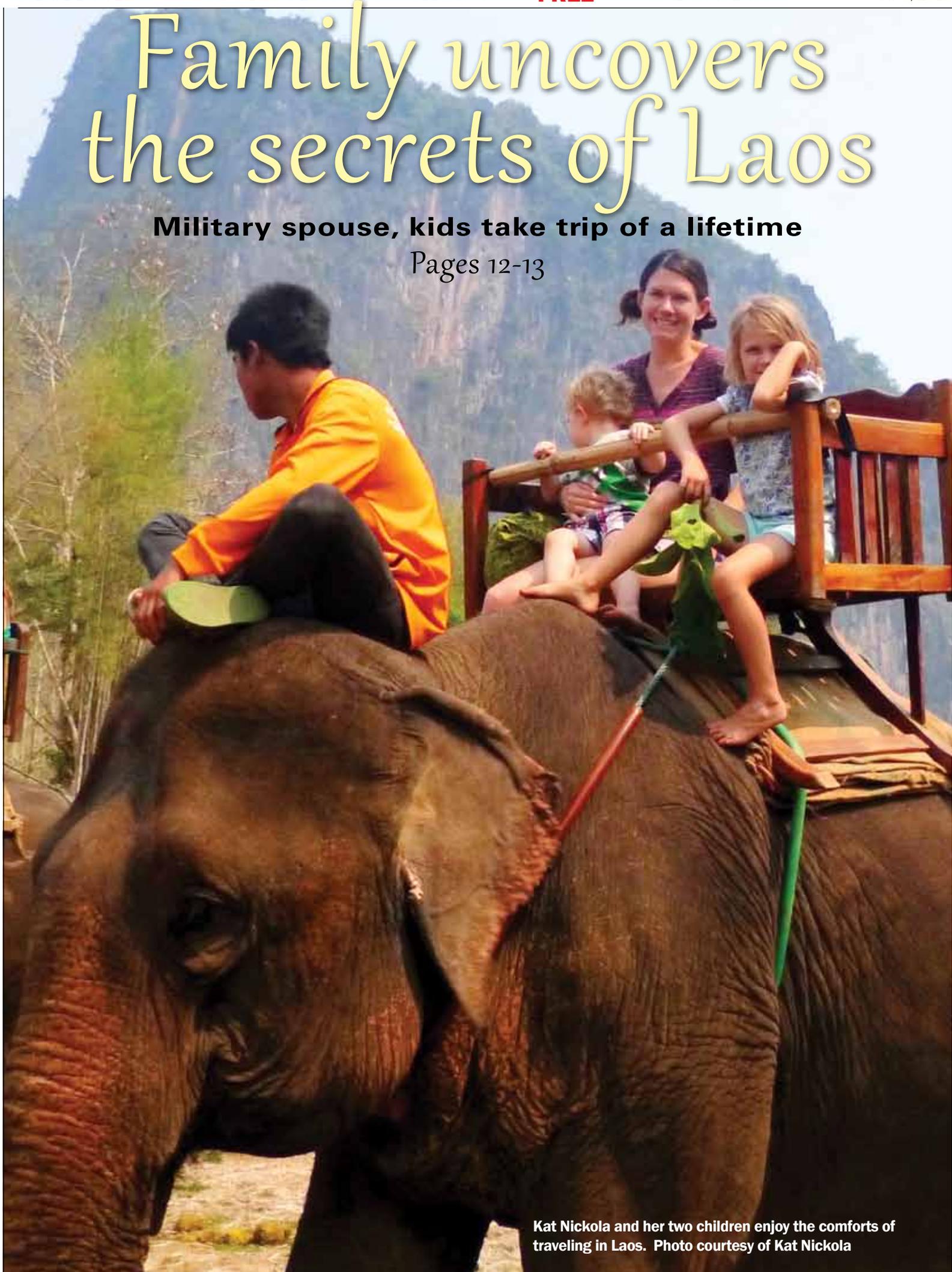
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Kat Nickola and her two children enjoy the comforts of traveling in Laos. Photo courtesy of Kat Nickola

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Novice monks out for a walk.



My son exploring the beach along the Mekong.



One of the numerous city temples.



Luang Prabang night market

Authentic & Family explores the myste

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KAT NICKOLA,
STRIPES KOREA

The country of Laos has an amazingly intricate history full of kings and takeovers, French occupation and covert missions. Its ties to the West are deep and longstanding, which makes for a fascinating visit.

The arms of French colonial culture still wrap around this place, and the echoes of secretive American assistance can still be heard. Officially called the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the country is now communist but has begun to open its doors wide for tourists. Few come, which is why it is such a wonderful place to go.

This is especially true in the ancient capital city of Luang Prabang. Walking amongst the city's purely southeast Asian temples will carry you into ancient times. Then you round a corner onto a quaint street lined with French-colonial shops and street vendors selling baguettes. It's this combination of ancient culture and colonial remnants that puts the entire town on the list of UNESCO world heritage sites.

The baguettes are delicious; stuffed with any sandwich filling you can imagine or simply eaten plain with their wonderful crusty rind. This is how my children liked them. We would spend our day rambling from temple to temple visiting with the young monk initiates, eating crusty bread at outdoor stalls, going on an afternoon adventure, and spending the evening at the night market. The pace of life, and vacation, is slower and more rhythmic in Luang Prabang.

It hasn't always been that way. The town has been its own city state, absorbed into Thai occupation, Khmer occupation, French colonialism, a royal seat of government, and was secretly involved in the Second Indochina War (Vietnam War). The country was officially neutral

during the conflict with Vietnam. However, it was all but impossible to maintain neutrality with the North Vietnamese constantly in Laos running supplies along the bordering Ho Chi Minh trail.

Laos asked the U.S. for assistance, and in 1966 the covert Raven FAC mission was born. The Raven FACs (Forward Air Controllers) were U.S. Air Force pilots chosen for their flying experience in Vietnam; they were secretly stationed at airfields throughout Laos, including Long Thieng and Luang Prabang. These guys didn't go to work in uniforms and didn't carry an American ID. Technically they were under the jurisdiction of the Air Attaché to the Laos Embassy, but the CIA really called the shots. Their mission: to support the Royal Laotian Army on the ground as they pushed out the North Vietnamese and to suppress the Pathet Laos communist insurgency. The Raven FACs flew low and slow in O-1's, U-17's (a Cessna 185), and T-28's.

Sometimes they carried a Laotian to translate with troops on the ground. Other times they were observers or flew reconnaissance missions looking for targets, but mostly they provided air strikes for Laotian ground troops under attack.

There is nothing left in Luang Prabang to even acknowledge the Raven FACs ever existed, but as the kids and I landed at the same airport, their spirits in the mist could be felt. As we explored the local area we could imagine the tough and steely pilots negotiating the dramatic karst hills, flying along the Mekong river valley, and keeping an eye out for the enemy. The pilots weren't in it for the glory or reward; quite the opposite, as their existence would be denied. So, why did they go? I would venture to guess it was pure crazy adventure seeking; danger and thrill rolled into one - The true spirit of the fighter pilot. Now, thankfully, there is no enemy and we can once again take in the tranquil joys of

For more information about

- www.ravens.org
- Christopher Robbins, *The Secret War of Laos, As*

this beautiful country.

The day after our arrival, I loaded the kids into a van and we rode out to the Kuang Si waterfalls for an afternoon of swimming. The falls are really a long series of cascades and pools that flow along the river below a 200-foot-high waterfall. It is a site to behold, and there were lots of people that day taking it in.

Fortunately, there is lots of room to explore and we found a great pool downstream that had a shallow entry perfect for swimming. The water was freezing, but our bodies adjusted. My kindergarten daughter spent her time trying to catch the little fish in the pool with bags from the baguette sandwiches I bought at a stand before leaving town. My two-year-old son, on the other hand, wanted to join the 'big boys' jumping off the 10 foot waterfall that flowed out from our pool. We carefully walked out along the edge of the falls to join a small group of college-age backpackers and he decided that a smaller fall from a lower pool would be better. Good idea. He slid off with glee into the crystal blue water and we swam around for quite a bit. It was deep!

They were both exhausted after swimming, so we spent the afternoon napping at our wonderful little guesthouse. It was a typical 'colonial-style' building with a big front balcony, huge wooden shutters and wrought iron windows: no glass. The warm breeze felt wonderful. This was March, and the very end of the dry season. Soon the rains would come.

In the evening, we wandered to the local night market where we spent every night of our trip. It is a fun bustling street closed to traffic and filled with tents at dusk. Local people and minority



Retired Buddha's within the Pak Ou caves

and ancient eries and mystique of Laos

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ia Books, 2000.

groups from the surrounding area bring handicrafts, metal works, paper craft and quilts to sell. There is also plenty of street food and many open-front cafes serving dinner.

This is not a party town, thank goodness, and things close up early for a good night's sleep.

Morning comes quickly in Luang Prabang. At 4 a.m. the deep gongs of the 32 city Buddhist temples begin to sound as the novice monks rise for morning meditations and rituals. This is the heart of the city. There are thousands of young monks here because of the concentration of temples, and at dawn they begin to process along the streets collecting food donations - merit from Buddhist followers - as their primary meal for the day.

Almost all men in this Buddhist culture spend some time as a monk. Many are sent when they are 8, 9, or 10 to spend a season or a couple years gaining an education within the monastery. A few make the lifelong commitment, and remain at the temple. Luang Prabang monks wear the orange-colored robes typical of Southeast Asian Buddhism, and it was fun to get to know some of them during our visit. My two kids enjoyed playing with a dog at temple monks had named "Thea." They also stripped down and swam in the river with all the local kids, posed so young novices could snap pictures with their cell phones. They learned that kids in Laos are just like them.

There is, however, a much deeper history within Luang Prabang. A tour of the local palace gave us a glimpse into the life of the not-too-distant past life of the Lao royal family. In a side room

of the palace is the sacred namesake of the town itself: the Phra Bang, or "Royal Buddha Image." Legend claims that this 32-inch bronze and gold leaf statue was made in the 1st century in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). It came to Laos in the 1350's via the ancient Khmer Empire's capital city of Angkor in what is now Cambodia. Its origins are treated as fact by the local Buddhist community, as is the statues' traditional power of providing the right to rule to the city who owns it. This kind of ancient history, that is still alive today, can be seen further afield, too.

On another day in Luang Prabang, the kids and I rode north along the river to a small town called Pak Ou. We enjoyed an elephant ride along the banks of the river, and a small 3-year-old baby elephant joined us. My daughter took a special liking for the baby and was given the chance later to have some feeding time with it. She was in her glory caring for the young animal.

From our perch on the elephants we could see huge cliffs rising up to form the Mekong river valley. At the water's edge we boarded a small flat-bottomed boat with a trolling motor to cross the river and got onto a floating bamboo dock at the base of some stairs leading into the cliff. This open-front cavern is the sacred resting place for thousands of Buddha statues and relics that have been damaged or broken or replaced in temples throughout the Luang Prabang area. It was chock full of centuries-old Buddha's, and tourists.

The kids and I briefly snapped some pictures before making our way up a stone stairway to a higher, less visited cave. Now, this was a cave! It was dark and mysterious; our flashlight landed on Buddha images, statues in every niche within the main cavern and within a side grotto. The kids were fascinated and challenged each other to find more and more statues. We saw hundreds of them.

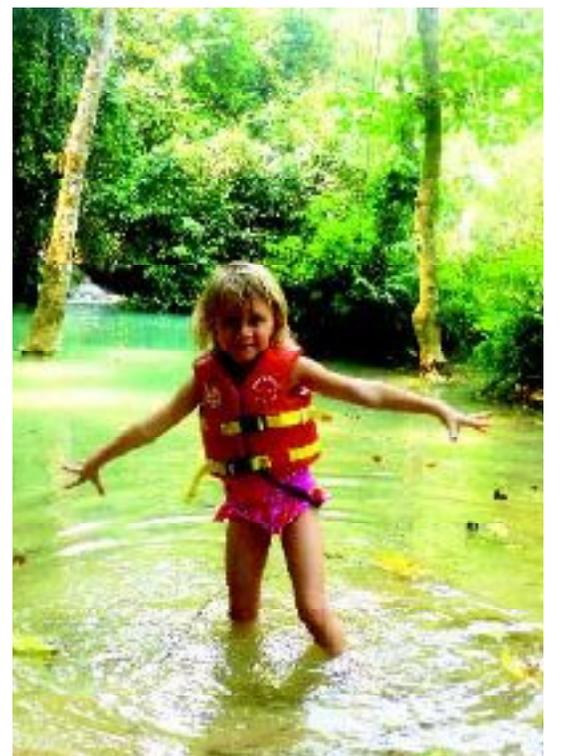
The mystique took over: These same statues would have been here, silently sitting in their secret cave, while the Raven FAC's took off from Luang Prabang just down river on their secret missions 50 years ago.

One evening in Luang Prabang, we climbed the hill in the center of town from the 'back' staircase passing a series of gigantic Buddha statues until we reached the peak of Phou Si. From here we watched the sun glisten on the misty river and set behind the mountains. We could also see the runway - upgraded since the time of the Raven FACs; the 7:30 flight to Hanoi was just taking off.

When I returned from our trip, my husband had an interesting question: "Well,

was there anything different that made it feel communist?"

I know, of course, he meant "were you and the kids safe?" We certainly were. In fact, there were two things that, only in retrospect, stood out as being quite remarkable. Unlike most other Southeast Asian countries I've been too, the salespeople, street vendors, and even tuk-tuk drivers were not pushy. They still solicited business for themselves by offering services, but a simple "no thank you" and they happily obliged, content to enjoy their day as much as you. In addition, the Laotian people - at least in Luang Prabang - seem to follow the rules. Not that other people don't, but it's not common in, say Thailand, to see the locals queued up in a nice neat line or to find streets that are (though dusty and rocky) free from litter. Now, was this related to Laos government? I don't know. But it did get me thinking about how Luang Prabang did seem a bit different than other places we've been in southeast Asia. It felt authentic and ancient. It seemed mysterious with stories behind each facade; stories that connect with my own.



My daughter playing in the water at Kuang Si waterfalls



The Kuang Si waterfall