

one foot in laos



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Lament for a changing Laos

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Dervla Murphy is a remarkable woman and in many ways the very model of a traveller. The passion she brings to life and to travel, she also brings to her writing. The latest in her long series of travel books is a vivid description of, ode to, and lament for Laos - a country on the verge of major development.

Over her 68 years, Murphy has walked and pedalled herself across countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. In this, her 15th travel book, the indomitable Irish sexagenarian pedals across the Annamite Mountains with an injured foot, walks kilometres of jungle trails, floats down the Mekong and charms Lao villagers throughout the country.

Murphy's journey is travel as it should be. She firmly eschews the harried race from tourist site to tourist site. Instead, she relishes the sheer joy of the journey, from the open road to a random encounter with a musket-wielding Hmong hunter. Where others take tourist buses, Murphy simply starts walking. For Murphy, the delays or discomforts that enrage other travellers are just part of the adventure of Laos.

Her enthusiasm is matched by her eye for detail. When recounting meals with Lao hosts, she leaves no bug unturned. The astounding vistas of the Lao countryside, the havoc wreaked by logging companies, the beauty of the Lao's traditional clothing, the feel of the country's dirt roads, all of these are vividly and engagingly described.

But Murphy is most engaged by the Lao themselves. She is enchanted by everything from the ubiquitous smiles of the majority Lao Lum to the gracious hospitality of the minority Hmong in their remote mountain villages. Eager to please and difficult to anger, the Lao, Murphy writes unequivocally, are 'the most lovable and in many ways the most civilised people I have ever travelled among'. She drinks with them at their (Hmong and Chinese and ethnic Lao) festivals, eats bamboo rat and monitor lizard at their tables, and bridges the language gap with intricate sign-language conversations.

Her love of Laos exactly as is leads to her strident denunciations of any and all change. Laos is embarking on the transformations that have occurred in (afflicted, Murphy would say) neighbouring Thailand, China, Vietnam and Cambodia. While the issues of economic development and cultural change are complex, Murphy's handling of them is overly simplistic: Laos good. Change bad.

Many of Murphy's villains are deserving, and easy, targets: bribe-wielding logging companies or arrogant and ignorant UN bureaucrats. Others are less clear cut: Murphy is depressed by

electric pylons in an otherwise beautiful valley. While pylons are not aesthetically pleasing, Laos is not a nature preserve for foreigners, it is a country with inhabitants who deserve to enjoy the benefits of electricity we take for granted.

For such a keen observer and on such a vital issue, Murphy can be remarkably dismissive. She portrays any Lao's desire for change as nothing more than seduction or corruption by rapacious outsiders.

Murphy rarely takes a nuanced look at the desires for change. For example, while we greatly admire Murphy's bicycle riding, is it unreasonable that an older Lao woman would prefer a motorbike? The joy of a Cambodian able to explore the world on the Internet or a Vietnamese whose family can afford to send her to university instead of the rice fields are testimony to legitimate benefits of development.

Similarly, Murphy's lament on the demise of Lao culture in the face of 'progress' is also worthy of thought, but not of oversimplification. She equates modernisation with a total loss of cultural identity, but are Hong Kong Chinese, for example, any less

Chinese than their counterparts in poverty-stricken Anhui province? All of these are deep, complex questions.

Even if one finds her political commentary oversimplified, she brings up vital issues. The Lao, whom Murphy so affectionately describes, are on the cusp of drastic material and spiritual change. For these people, the questions Murphy raises are of supreme importance.

This is an excellent travelogue written by a remarkable woman. Her passion for adventure, the passion of her narrative, and the passion with which she condemns what distresses her all produce a memorable and vivid reading experience.

One Foot In Laos by Dervla Murphy John Murray
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目录:

[one foot in laos 下载链接1](#)

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评论

[one foot in laos_下载链接1](#)

书评

[one foot in laos_下载链接1](#)