



**Larry Cashman, the  
Unabashed Wimp**

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Back of the Beyond**

When I worked at US Embassies in Jakarta and Manila, I spent endless hours going to useless meetings and conferences where pedantic blowhards (especially me) spewed self-righteous bullshit about arcane matters of little consequence. My work in Laos, on the other hand, actually required that I travel to some of the most remote and lawless areas on the planet. Building hospitals and health centers in the untamed wilderness of two far-flung provinces in northern Laos required visiting the sites where facilities were to be built; and then monitoring the construction to make sure the contractors were not cutting corners too much.



**"The Back of the Beyond" in Laos**

The designated construction sites were located in villages in the remote mountains and forests of Laos, which my colleagues and I referred to as the "Back of the Beyond." These places could only be reached by flying in rickety, 15 seat, Chinese-made, propeller-driven airplanes to the provincial capitals of Oudomxay and Xieng Khouang Provinces. From there we took 4-wheel drive vehicles over impassable roads that literally disappeared into the forest. Then our "real journey" began as we had to get out and walk — climbing steep mountains, wading through streams,

and crossing rivers until we reached our destination. This was usually some tribal village inhabited by Hmong, Yao, Khmu, Akha, or Louei hill tribes. When we finally arrived, exhausted from our travails, the villagers had one thing on their minds — drinking as much of their homebrewed white lightning (called

Lao-Lau in the local vernacular) as possible without their livers exploding. Seeing a honky like Larry Cashman get loaded and semi-comatose on Lao-Lau provided them with much mirth and amusement.

There were no amenities of any kind, in these villages — no electricity, no clean water, no latrines, no schools, no health care, no money. You name it and it did not exist here. What they definitely had plenty of was malaria, measles, tuberculosis, diarrhea, pneumonia, and assorted bacteria, viruses, mycoses, protozoa, trematodes, nematodes, cestodes, spirochetes, and rickettsiae. Added to this was an abundance of unexploded ordnance (UXOs) littering the countryside, the leftover detritus of nine years of US bombing. As the reader may surmise, these communities were not desirable tourist destinations, much less for a pansy like Larry Cashman.

As you can imagine, I dreaded places like the ones described above, preferring the creature comforts and conveniences found in civilized Vientiane. Unfortunately, installing a health care delivery system meant providing basic health services to people living in the “Back of the Beyond.” Sooner or later, it became increasingly clear, I would have to drag my sorry ass out there to see what was actually happening with the funds bequeathed to the Lao government by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Getting directly involved with construction projects in northern Laos led to my lamentable association with a particularly unctuous and repugnant humanoid life form commonly referred to as "architects". These individuals are devious, mentally challenged bean counters who control every phase of construction — from designing the buildings, preparing the bidding documents, overseeing the bidding process, and evaluating the bids; and who then received hefty kick-backs from each construction company bidding on a project. Architects chase construction projects the way lawyers chase ambulances, with an equally self-aggrandizing result.

During my career I have dealt with assorted professional rabble and charlatans. The list includes economists, lawyers, physicians, dentists, accountants, and politicians (the latter undoubtedly being the lowest, most despicable, and most venal life form found within the animal kingdom. Politicians make a snake in the grass seem like a paragon of virtue in comparison). Architects, however, rank right up there with this oleaginous lot and very close to the "bottom of the proverbial barrel".

Much to my chagrin and eventual misfortune, we had to hire an architect to design our hospitals and health centers, and then supervise their construction. Because of warnings from colleagues about the aborted cerebral and motor development most architects possess, the basic qualifications were kept at an exceedingly low bar. The successful candidate had to be able to (1) walk and chew gum at the same time, (2) differentiate right from left with at least 50% accuracy, (3) maintain uninterrupted consciousness for at least one hour, and (4) be able to solve the mathematical problem “How much is 2 plus 2?” For a while our team considered tossing requirements "3" and "4" out the window, but the Asian Development Bank refused, insisting certain standards had to be maintained.

We finally hired an architect named Bounmee. My suspicions about his competence were first aroused when he asked to use a calculator to solve the mathematical problem; and confirmed when he got it wrong. But since Bounmee was the only applicant who fulfilled the first three qualifications, we hired him anyway — hoping for the best but expecting the worst.

Well, Bounmee didn't disappoint us. I strongly recommend against embarking upon any construction project with an imbecile for an architect. His designs were horrendous, his methods antiquated, and all material specifications were subsequently found to be incorrect. I knew we had a serious problem when one of our staff went out to inspect a health center, leaned against a wall and to his horror, the wall caved in and the ceiling collapsed on his head. When queried as to why this problem occurred, Bounmee postulated that "Maybe the inspector had leaned on the wall too hard." What should one expect from an imbecile? We avoided leaning on walls, doorways, gates, or window sills during future inspections.



**Cashman's architect Bounmee  
doing some of his best work**

Having already built 30 "Bounmee-inspired," structurally suspect health centers, we now had to visit the villages where each one was being built to assess the damage. My worst nightmare became reality when I was tapped as one of the four member team that would have to visit each construction site. The team included two officials from the Lao Ministry of Health along with Palomede Jupien and me. Regrettably, I was now facing an eight week trip into the "Back of the Beyond" in Oudomxay and Xieng Khouang provinces.

As a matter of principle I avoided such field trips like the plague, since going to these villages would expose me to diseases that made the "Black Death" of Middle-Ages fame seem like a case of the sniffles. In addition such peregrinations meant hauling my lily white, candy-ass out to 30 sites situated in the remote mountainous jungles of northern Laos, places located on the fringes of civilization that harbored bandits and hostile rebels. Adding insult to injury, these inspections were scheduled just as the rainy season was morphing into the cold season, climatic conditions that Larry Cashman finds most distasteful. For icing on the cake, these field trips would require that I squeeze my bony ass into the back of a pick-up truck traveling over impassable roads for hours on end before hiking through the mountains to reach a dirt poor village where I would have to sleep on the floor, bathe in icy cold streams, and take a shit in the woods, behavioral practices which held little attraction for a wimp like me. This trip would introduce Larry Cashman to the many miseries and irregularities found in the isolated areas of northern Laos.

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In 2019 The Plain of Jars, situated in Xieng Khouang province, was officially designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Despite this distinction, the area is still one of the most dangerous archaeological sites in the world. Thousands of unexploded bombs remain from the Secret War of the 1960s, when North Vietnamese troops supporting the Communist Pathet Lao fought a land war in The

Plain of Jars with the Royalist Lao Government (supported by the US Air Force), trying to create a land corridor from North Vietnam to the Ho Chi Minh trail. Much of the actual fighting, however, was performed by Hmong villagers who loathed the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies.



**The Plain of Jars, Xiengkhouang Province, Laos**

The Plain of Jars got its name from the megalithic stone urns that stand up to three meters high and weigh as much as 30 tons that are ubiquitously scattered over the descriptively named Plain. Today huge numbers of tourists flock to observe more than 100 sites that contain more than 2,000 huge stone jars. Archaeologists have dated their origin from between 1,350 and 350 BC.

In 1996, when I arrived for my excursion through the mountains of

Xieng Khouang Province to inspect health centers, there was only one stone jar site on the Plain of Jars that had been cleared of unexploded ordnance and was safe enough to visit. On the day of my arrival, my hosts took me to see the jars. Since the site was located just two miles from Phonsavan, the provincial capital of Xieng Khouang province, the road was good, the site was safe and guarded by soldiers, and the huge prehistoric jars dotting the vast plain were spectacular. The terrain was flat as far as the eye could see. Maybe this trip would not be as rough as I expected. But first impressions are often deceiving.....

The next day, after being packed into the back of a pickup truck with Palomede, my Lao colleagues, and an assorted collection of squealing pigs and bleating goats, I was quickly disabused of this false sense of security.



**Some jars were three meters high and weighed 30 tons**

We headed north from Phonsavan and after about one hour the flat terrain of the Plain of Jars transformed into rugged, steep mountains; whereupon the partially paved road degenerated into a muddy morass. As anticipated, we soon abandoned our vehicle and started walking. While trudging over mountains and through the forest, on a long trek to reach a newly constructed health center, a torrential downpour engulfed our group. We had to hike through slime and tall wet grass the entire journey.

By the time we reached the village where the health center was being built, I was drenched and covered with mud. When I took my shoes off, I noticed that my white socks had turned a crimson red and



**Cashman's feet were soaked with blood**

were soaked with blood. I had been attacked by leeches!! My ankles were covered with them, about 10 on each foot, gorging themselves in a tasty blood meal at my expense.

Leeches are nasty little “suckers.” There are many different kinds, including terrestrial, arboreal, and aquatic varieties. The ones on my feet and toes were about one half inch long, two mm. in diameter, and could move themselves by flipping their tail-end over their front-end like gymnasts doing backward somersaults. When they attack their prey, they inject an anticoagulant (similar to heparin) that allows the blood to thin and subsequently ooze from the victim's body into the leech's oral cavity.

Once I successfully removed the leeches, I couldn't get the damn bleeding to stop. I tried pressure, a tourniquet, bandages.....nothing worked. The wounds just kept oozing blood, and quite prolifically, until my ankles were reduced to a bloody mess. Having been trained to deal with such emergencies, I responded to this crisis instinctively and reflexively — by fainting dead away at the sight of all that blood. When the going gets tough, it's time for Larry Cashman to check out.



**A leech engorged with Cashman's blood**

I regained consciousness after the second glass of “Lao-Lau” was poured down my throat, surrounded by villagers bemused at the sight of the alleged health expert incapacitated by leeches. When enough blood had spilled to sate their amusement, the villagers demonstrated how to stanch the bleeding, by placing a small piece of paper directly over the wound. The cellulose in the paper produced a matrix for coagulation. Sure enough, the bleeding stopped almost immediately.

Once we inspected the health center and determined that most of it had to be torn down and entirely rebuilt, we high-tailed it back to the nearest town, which was the district of Nonghet. I led the pack as fast as my blood-drenched ankles would carry me. My tolerance for Laos' irregularities — the food, the drinking, the corrupt officials, the nightclubs — was pretty high, but leeches went beyond the pale.



**The governor and his staff wore Siberian fur hats**

Once we arrived back at Nonghet District, we learned that the District Governor and his staff wanted to meet with us. By and large these characters were a bunch of rough and tumble, booze-consuming ruffians. Their offices were broken down, dilapidated unmaintained concrete buildings featuring wide open windows with no screens, creating a bizarre mausoleum effect in the cold season. Since the cold season had already arrived in the mountains, everyone was wearing those picturesque Siberian fur hats that flip down over one's ears a la Genghis Khan.

So this was the scene as we sat down to discuss important issues affecting the socio-economic development of Laos.... such as where would we have lunch and would there be enough “Lao-Lau” to satisfy the consumption requirements of six hard drinking Lao and two sissy-pants honkies, a volume normally measured in gallons.

The Governor was seated at the head of the table, with me directly to his left. While we were immersed in discussion, a gigantic flying grasshopper soared in through the open window and began circumnavigating the meeting table, looking for a convenient place to alight. As the reader may know, Larry Cashman has a congenital aversion to insects of any size and shape. I loathe the repulsive creatures, with their scraggly legs and creepy antennae, their nasty little stingers and oversized mandibles. Unfortunately, Laos happens to have the most diverse variety of insects, large and small, found anywhere in the world.



**The grasshopper looked like it was exposed to gamma radiation**

I froze in horror at the sight of the beast fluttering above our heads. Then I started ducking and dodging, then bobbing and weaving, to avoid the buggie as it flew past my head on several kamikaze-style swoops. The Lao, of course, didn't even bat an eyelash or move a muscle. Insects simply do not bother them at all. Finally the winged monster landed on the shoulder of my Lao colleague, Siphone (pronounced SEE-PAWN), who was sitting directly across the table, and I could get a good look at it. It was enormous; at least 6 inches in length, as if it had earlier been exposed to gamma radiation and grew to disproportionate size. Siphone didn't even notice the creature resting on his

shoulder, and just sat there picking his nose, belching, and spitting on to the floor like everyone else at the meeting. Palomede saw it too but he had been in Laos long enough to be inured to its arthropod kingdom. I, on the other hand, froze and never took my eyes off the behemoth for a minute. As long as it wasn't bothering me, though, I was relatively untroubled.

This period of blissful contentment was short-lived, however, as the grasshopper once again took flight, buzzing us several times, before landing on the table directly in front of the Governor and me. Again, none of the Lao even acknowledged the creature's presence, continuing our meeting as if nothing was awry. I was frozen with fear by this time. I simply couldn't take another round of getting buzzed by this dive bomber. So, in a flash, I decided it was time to smash the brute with my notebook; and to hell with any Buddhist proscriptions about killing sentient beings.

Just as I was getting ready to raise my notebook, the Governor nonchalantly reached out and grabbed the grasshopper between his thumb, index finger, and forefinger, and squeezed it to death without a nanosecond break in the proceedings. This was fine with me. It saved me the trouble of having to wipe grasshopper guts from my notebook. Then, just as nonchalantly, as I watched in disbelief, the Governor took the dead grasshopper, raised it to his lips and bit off its head and the top half of the insect's

thorax, smacking his lips as he swallowed the tasty morsel. Then, always the gentleman and gracious host, the Governor turned in my direction and asked if I wanted a bite.

During this entire incident, not a single person at that meeting acknowledged the grasshopper or the Governor's little mid-morning snack break. Come to think of it, they didn't take much notice of me either when I regurgitated my breakfast in response to the Governor's generous offer. When I described this incident to my colleagues in Vientiane later, their only surprise was that the Governor had taken the time to kill the grasshopper before devouring it. Flying grasshoppers are reputedly tastier when eaten alive.

And so it went for the next four weeks — long rides in the back of a pickup truck over terrible and/or impassable roads, long treks climbing over treacherous mountains on leech-infested paths, more drinking and eating unrecognizable food, and of course more encounters with Bounmee-inspired structurally suspect health centers. However, this living nightmare was just beginning, as our team boarded the plane for the flight to Oudomxay.

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When I disembarked from the plane at that sorry excuse for an airport in Oudomxay province, the Wild Men of Oudomxay were none too happy to see me. They were still smarting from the \$400 in counterfeit bills that Seamus Campbell and I stiffed them with on our last trip. They were doubly pissed for getting stuck taking the blame. The new Honda motorcycles they were riding and the neatly pressed clothes they were wearing insinuated that they had obviously benefitted handsomely from the construction contracts that had been awarded, no doubt assuaging their anger. Between the shoddy architectural designs from our moron architect Bounmee and the corners that were cut on the construction materials to finance the kickbacks to the Wild Men of Oudomxay, I couldn't wait to see what our newly constructed health centers actually looked like.

After four weeks trudging through the cold, wet, disease-infested mountains in Xieng Khouang, I was physically exhausted by the time I reached Oudomxay for four more weeks of hard travel. The first health center we visited had a bathroom with a latrine and sink, but the builders had neglected to install any plumbing. At our next stop the builder had contracted with local villagers to go into the forest to cut wooden boards rather than purchase them from a nearby sawmill. Lao villagers in the hinterlands are not expert at precise measurements, so a one inch by six inch board might actually be 1" x 4" at one end and 1" x 8" at the opposite end, leaving gaping spaces when stacked side by side on the floor and roofs. At another site the contractor had mixed so little concrete with the sand and gravel that I could easily crumble the cement walls with my hand. And so it went at each construction site, making me realize that this would be an exceedingly long and not too enjoyable trip.

I survived the first three weeks of this ordeal intact, but during the fourth week as we were on our way to Na Mor District (pronounced NA-MAW) up along the Lao-Chinese border, I began feeling feverish with body aches and pains, one of those sudden tropical fevers that can disable you in a few hours.

Upon arrival in Na Mor we were met by the District Governor, who was a genuinely nice man — when he was sober. Unfortunately, he was sober for no more than 20% of the time. The plan was to accompany the Governor to Ban Vieng village, another 24 km. away straight into the mountains situated more or less right on the Chinese border, where a health center was being built. I was feeling pretty ill, but decided to make the trip.

It took another three hours to reach Ban Vieng. At times I thought we wouldn't make it. The inclines were so steep, the streams so deep, and the road so bad, that I thought we would have to abandon the vehicle. On several occasions we had to get out and push the vehicle to a place where it could get some traction. At other times we had to lift the vehicle and carry it for short but exhausting stretches. After reaching Ban Vieng, we went through the usual ritual of drinking, negotiating, drinking, eating, drinking, and inspecting the shoddy health center construction. By the time we left, I had a raging fever, generalized myalgia, and chills. Larry Cashman was deathly ill.

Upon returning to Na Mor, the Governor had arranged a dinner for us accompanied by copious amounts of drinking. I was so sick that I declined the dinner offer, choosing instead to return to my hotel room and try to get some needed rest. The term "hotel" should be interpreted loosely in northern Laos. Rather, the structure was a broken-down wooden shack with dormitory style rooms that contained beds with straw mats for mattresses. It seemed that Holiday Inns with Sealy Posturepedic mattresses had not penetrated Na Mor District in 1996. Nevertheless, it was a bed with something resembling a mosquito net where I could recline and sleep through the night. Having been in endemic malarious areas for the past three weeks, I was concerned that I might have contracted malaria. If the fever broke then spiked again, I would treat myself with anti-malarial medication and not take any chances.

My host and colleagues were genuinely concerned about my condition. They figured that anyone who would turn down a sumptuous feast of turkey blood, raw snails right out of the rice paddies, and insipidly boiled mammalian organs, accompanied by all the Lao-Lau you can drink, must really be sick. They got me into bed, made sure I was comfortable, and even interrupted their drinking occasionally to check on my condition. Since an earthquake could usually not interrupt the Lao from their drinking, they must have really been concerned about my condition.

The next morning, I was abruptly awakened at 6 AM as the Governor burst into my room to see how I was feeling, while announcing "I have just the thing to fix you up. Come with me."

Still drowsy and in a febrile stupor, I was led out to the balcony, where the Governor's wife was waiting, surrounded by a bevy of the local gentry. His wife was a round little roly-poly lady about 55 years old, her hair pulled straight back in a bun, with orange-brown teeth from chewing betel nut<sup>1</sup>. In my soporific state she resembled a big fat butterball turkey as it emerges from the oven on Thanksgiving. In her right hand she held what was clearly recognizable as the dried heart of some huge mammal (a wild

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<sup>1</sup> Betel nut is the seed of the Areca palm. Mixed in a packet, called a "quid," encapsulated by a betel leaf containing lime, the betel nut, and a flavoring of tobacco or cinnamon, it is chewed regularly by one tenth of the world's population. It provides a buzz equivalent to six cups of coffee. Over time chewing betel nut stains teeth orange. It is also a precursor to oral cancer.



forest buffalo, as I learned later). In her left hand she held a live, three foot snake. On the table in front of her were five porcupine spines and a sharp knife. Most ominously, however, lying upon this same table was a newly opened bottle of Lao Lau.

“I am going to mix you an elixir of traditional medicine to cure your fever,” she cackled in her nearly incomprehensible Lao. She could have mixed it in advance but was afraid that, being a foreigner and non-believer in traditional medicines, I wouldn’t drink it. Better to bring the ingredients and mix them right in front of this distinguished foreign guest so that he could see it was the real deal. Then he would surely agree to drink it.



**The Governor’s wife with her betel nut-stained teeth**

This scene was just what I needed at 6 AM after a restless night of feverish sleep. Watching a fat lady with orange teeth mix a noxious concoction of animal parts was not my idea of breakfast entertainment. However, in view of their concern and eagerness to help me, I could hardly refuse to consume the offensive potion.

So right there on the balcony, while I swayed back and forth in a feverish stupor, the Governor's wife cut a few pieces from the buffalo heart and put them into a pestle. To this she added the follicular end of the porcupine quills, which allegedly contain powerful medicinal ingredients, then ground them into a powder. The mixed ingredients were subsequently added to a half glass of Lao Lau, which apparently forms the basis of all Lao traditional medicine. Then, as I watched in horror, she proceeded to cut the snake’s throat with a quick slashing motion that even O.J. Simpson would envy, and poured the blood into her magical potion, producing a viscous, reddish-brown, bitter alcoholic elixir.

"Drink it down in one gulp and you will feel better by tomorrow," I was told.

I was in big trouble now, with dwindling prospects for an escape from my impending dilemma. My first inclination was to cut and run, the true coward’s first recourse. But in my febrile state, I wouldn’t get far. Perhaps I could talk my way out of it. After all, I’ve been an unparalleled bullshitter all of my life and language was definitely not a barrier. But being too delirious and horrified to think straight, I couldn’t devise a rational excuse to beg out. The only option was to bite the bullet and drink the poison. So it was bottoms up, down the hatch, and I drank the whole “bloody thing” down in one felled swoop.

Whether the concoction cured my fever is difficult to say, since I spent the next 24 hours with paroxysmal vomiting interspersed with explosive diarrhea. Drinking strychnine would have been like ambrosia in comparison. The good news was that, in this parlous state, a fever or malaria was the least of my troubles. A prolapsed rectum or regurgitated esophagus was a larger worry. I almost died. As predicted, though, the fever was gone by the next day. No parasite could withstand such an assault.

But this tale isn’t over yet. Our team still had to drive back to the provincial capital through dense jungle areas controlled by rebel groups opposed to the government. Concerned about my health and the dangerous road conditions, the Governor decided to provide us with an armed escort to guarantee our safety. With their flintlock rifles and flasks of Lao-Lau whiskey protruding from their pockets, the guards

provided little comfort. The trip started uneventfully as we passed through primary forest overgrown with tall hardwood trees.

Then I heard a pop, like a cork exploding from a champagne bottle. It reminded me of the sound I heard when flying in that helicopter over rebel-controlled areas of Palawan in the Philippines that turned out to be the helicopter motor misfiring<sup>2</sup>. Maybe this was just a vehicle malfunction. When I saw my colleagues duck for cover and bullets whistling overhead, I realized that this was neither a champagne party nor a faulty vehicle. We had been ambushed and were under rebel attack..

A firefight ensued, with our security guard returning fire in between swigs from their Lao-Lau flasks. I immediately crouched down in the safest spot I could find. But we were pinned down with little hope of escape. While in this predicament, I asked my colleagues who these rebels were and what were their grievances. I was told that they were Hmong rebels opposed to their government's policies which, they felt, favor the rich at the expense of the poor and oppressed minorities. How ironic, I thought. Here we were, under attack by rebels whose grievances I sympathized with. If only I could send them some graphic message that we shared similar political philosophies, they could save their ammunition for true reactionaries.

Then, I got a brilliant idea. I whipped out my trusty magic marker and, in the biggest letters possible, wrote a large sign which sent the following message:

**“BOB DOLE<sup>3</sup> IS AN ANTIQUATED ANACHRONISM, NEWT GINGRICH<sup>4</sup> IS A MORON WITH UNDESCENDED TESTES, AND RUSH LIMBAUGH<sup>5</sup> IS A BIG FAT IDIOT.”**

Immediately, the firing stopped, a white flag was raised, and the rebels emerged from the bushes to parley. Sure enough, they turned out to be registered Democrats, regular subscribers to the New York Times, and contributors to Bill Clinton's re-election campaign. I even carried back their absentee ballots for the presidential election.

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Eight weeks traipsing around the “Back of the Beyond” in Xieng Khouang and Oudomxay had left me psychologically traumatized. I had witnessed things that offended my sensibilities — biting leeches, radioactive giant flying grasshoppers, crumbling health centers, tropical fevers, toxic magic potion elixirs, and rebel ambushes by registered Democrats. The past eight weeks taught me that nothing that I experienced in Laos should surprise me anymore.

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<sup>2</sup> See Volume 2 Chapter 7 of the Cashman Chronicles “The Philippines” for Cashman's exploits on the helicopter flying over the communist rebel infested jungle in Palawan.

<sup>3</sup> This was 1996 and Bob Dole was the Republican nominee for President running against Bill Clinton.

<sup>4</sup> Newt Gingrich was the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1996, a knee-jerk conservative, and a closet racist.

<sup>5</sup> Rush Limbaugh was a bombastic, right wing, radio talk show celebrity who spent hours each day bloviating against liberals, immigrants, gays, women's rights, and climate change.

All that stood between me and deliverance to the creature comforts in Vientiane was a one hour flight from the Oudomxay provincial capital. I beat feet to the airport to get the hell out of there as quick as possible.

When I got to the airport, I saw a Chinese-made, chartreuse washing machine sitting in the baggage area of the terminal building, obviously waiting to be transported to Vientiane. All of these terms must be interpreted within the Lao context to truly appreciate this scene. The terminal building at the Oudomxay airport was a rickety, termite-laden, wooden shack with dirt floors and no windows. The baggage area was any level patch of ground in or around the terminal building not covered with feces from the water buffaloes that customarily grazed on the grass runway.



**The washing machine**

What was most bizarre, however, was seeing a washing machine in Oudomxay. After all, there was no electricity or running water in Oudomxay. Plus no one washed their clothes there anyway. But most of all a washing machine could never fit into the cargo hold of the little Yak 13 airplanes that were the only flying machines able to negotiate the imposing mountains surrounding Oudomxay, before landing on a tiny grass airstrip through the thick, low cloud cover.

The Yak 13 is a small, Chinese built, two engine prop job whose engines are so unreliable that the FAA won't license it for insurance purposes. On the other hand, it was reputed to glide quite well when its engines failed, which was not an attribute of boundless reassurance to Larry Cashman. The interior of the craft had five rows containing three seats in each row; two on the right side of the aisle and one on the left. The door to the cargo hold was large enough for a regular piece of luggage, or a large sized pig, the more likely form of cargo boarding flights at Oudomxay Airport. There was no way that a washing machine could fit through that door.

With great anticipation and curiosity, I waited to see what they were going to do with the washing machine. Presently, I saw this officious-looking guy walk around it waving two boarding passes. Since nothing surprised me in northern Laos anymore, I immediately knew what to expect next. When I boarded the plane, there was the chartreuse washing machine occupying seats 2A and 2B, just like any other paying passenger.

If seeing a washing machine at the Oudomxay Airport seemed odd, you can imagine how bizarre it was to see a washing machine strapped into the passenger cabin of a little 15 seat airplane. From my vantage point at the rear of the cabin, I surveyed the other passengers to gauge their reactions to the washing machine. Except for me there didn't seem to be anyone who acknowledged it, was surprised by it, or even noticed it. So there we were, 13 passengers and a washing machine, flying to Vientiane just as normal as can be.

Then about 15 minutes into the flight the Lao gentlemen sitting directly across the aisle in Seat 2C, struck up a conversation with the washing machine. Judging by his gesticulations and the pauses he gave the washing machine to respond, it seemed like quite an animated yet agreeable conversation.

My astonishment at this spectacle was only surpassed when the stewardess came by to serve the passengers a drink, offered the washing machine a Pepsi, the washing machine ostensibly accepted, and she opened the lid and poured in the drink. I was having a difficult time believing this entire scene unfolding before my very eyes, but held my tongue and controlled my bewilderment as best I could.

When we disembarked from the plane in Vientiane, I couldn't control my curiosity any further. I went up to the Lao gentleman sitting next to the washing machine and asked, "How could you spend that whole flight talking to a washing machine?"

"Are you kidding me?" he responded ingenuously. "That conversation was a lot more entertaining than the senseless drivel I get when sitting next to most Asian Development Bank consultants." Appropriately disarmed, I could only shake my head and walk away — although I couldn't argue with his comparing the intellectual capacity of a washing machine with the average ADB consultant. In fact, it was an insult to the washing machine.

Nothing surprises me in Laos anymore.