

Travel log

Almost lost in Laos



Indeed, Buddha was smiling down upon me as I raced the clock.

Photos Nick Marnell

By Nick Marnell

My nonchalance and carelessness finally caught up with me after decades of travel.

In Vientiane, the capital of Laos, on Thursday night, Nov. 28, a thug sped by me on a motorbike and ripped away my travel bag. The bag, which I held in my left hand, contained my passport, credit cards, cell phone, about \$300 and my Kindle.

I turned around in shock. "No way!!? Did this really just happen?" But the thief was long gone. All I had was about \$25 left to my name, which I had stashed in my pocket.

I know I should have ... blah, blah, blah. But I couldn't spend time on what should have happened. Or why it happened. Or feeling sorry for myself. I had a problem and it needed fixing.

I used part of that \$25 to go back to the hotel. A compassionate woman at the front desk let me use her phone and I canceled the two credit cards. That took until about 11 p.m., and then I went to bed. A restless sleep, but I was plotting my strategy as I tossed and turned.

In the morning, a guy from the hotel staff drove me to the U.S. embassy, about five miles away. The guy behind the window, a young fellow from Washington D.C. on the job 13 months in Laos, was helpful but not very encouraging. "You need to pay for a replacement passport. Then you need to go to the immigration police for a report, which you then take to the Lao consulate for your visa stamp. It could take days. And this is Friday, before a national three-day weekend."

He understood I was broke, but his hands were tied. He needed \$145 for the replacement passport before he could do anything.

The kid let me use the embassy phone, and it took two hours before AMEX approved a cash advance for me. But only through Western Union. The embassy uses MoneyGram, so that took more time to sort out. Because of that glitch, the kid drove me to the WU office and

vouched for me, and I got my money.

It's now 12:30 p.m. Stop for passport photos, and I started getting antsy as the photographer insisted on photoshopping my picture. Good grief! I kept staring at the time on my iPad, the only device I had not taken out of my room Thursday night.

Back to the embassy. "Wait out here, Mr. Marnell." And I waited. And waited. In a most inhospitable, austere room with that phone and a guard. Nine teller windows, with the blinds down, and rows of white plastic seats. After forever, the fellow popped his head out the teller window. "Our printer is being fixed." And the kid told me that this was never going to work out, because of the succeeding steps I needed to take. I had to prepare to stay here three extra days - till Dec. 5 - because the government offices would be closed until Tuesday since Monday, Dec. 2, was Laos Independence Day. And me, with not enough cash, no phone, and no credit cards.

I thought about having to cancel my flight, schedule a new one, get a hotel ... and no obvious way to do it. But I stopped dwelling on what might be and refocused.

No way was I giving up. At 1:45 p.m. the embassy kid finally gave me the replacement passport and directions to the immigration police.

My driver dropped me off at the consulate instead of the police. A gruff older guy at the consulate told me I had to get that letter from the immigration police to bring to him, but he was leaving early for the holiday weekend. Just great.

The police were two miles away, and it was 2:30 p.m. The immigration building resembled an old wooden two-story schoolhouse. A friendly, talkative immigration official rushed me through a process that he said could take up to three days ... in one hour! He must have felt my pain. I ran out of his building with my signed police report.

At 3:30 p.m. I'm counting my blessings, but I am

not out of the woods yet, not by a long shot. The immigration police report was one thing, but without that exit visa in my new passport, I still cannot leave the country.

I got back to the Laos consulate at close to 4 p.m. The man I needed to see was "in a meeting." Seriously?

So I waited. Was the "meeting" a cover for his early exit? I went out to the street and bought a bottle of water. It was 92 degrees-hot outside. Back to the old dilapidated consulate office, 4 o'clock hit. Then 4:15. Then rustling on the stairs. My heart jumped. It was him!

He wasn't impressed when I showed him the immigration paperwork. He took my police letter, grabbed my passport and told me to wait out in the lobby on either a wooden bench or a torn black vinyl chair.

The clock was ticking and I still had no visa. Was he the kind of lazy public official who would just leave that paperwork on his desk and split on Friday? The clock ticked to 4:25.

A minute later, the wooden door creaked open. "Nick Marnell! Come in here!"

My heart sank. Was something wrong? Was I going to be stuck three more days in the country? Was I going to be sent to jail?

"Here. And be careful." He handed me the passport book, which contained my exit visa, and nodded his head.

And that was it. My exit visa, at practically the last possible second. The guy's exterior gruffness apparently belied his genuine caring. I wondered if he came back from that "meeting" just for me.

Imagine how you would feel. Alone in a (very) foreign country, almost all of your personal items gone, relying on total strangers to help you pull through. And they do. Sure, most of them were paid to help, but each one seemed to have gone over and above their basic job requirements.

Did I learn anything? Probably not about being less careless and cavalier.

But this experience did confirm my feelings about the overall goodness of humankind.

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