

Wakefield Press

## **Lost in Laos**

Lydia Laube never says no to adventure, whether that means galloping a horse across the Mongolian plains or hopping on a cargo ship to Madagascar. Born into the farming community of Caltowie in the mid-north of South Australia, Lydia trained as a nurse in Adelaide, then set off to see the world. Her debut book, *Behind the Veil: An Australian nurse in Saudi Arabia*, was an instant bestseller, and she has become one of Australia's favourite travel writers. *Lost in Laos* is her eighth book. Between winter escapes to the sun, Lydia shares a small house in Adelaide with a large cat with attitude.

Also by Lydia Laube

*Behind the Veil*

*Bound for Vietnam*

*Is this the Way to Madagascar?*

*Llama for Lunch*

*Slow Boat to Mongolia*

*Temples and Tuk Tuks*

*The Long Way Home*

 **Lost in Laos** 

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# 1 Land of a Million Elephants



Land of a Million Elephants! How could anyone resist a place with a name like that?

A scan of the map of South-East Asia revealed that Laos, the country that formerly gave itself such an intriguing title, was the only place I hadn't visited. This had to be rectified. Over the years I had watched Laos progress through war, unrest and upheaval until it was relatively settled. In 1989 the Lao government relaxed enough to permit tourism, but it was controlled and restricted, making it difficult to get about. Finally, individual travel was possible. Right, I decided, now Laos is ready for me – I am off!

But of course I couldn't go straight there like any sane, sensible person. Laos is a landlocked country of 236,800 square kilometres. It shares borders with Cambodia, China, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam, so adventures could be had along the way if I travelled there overland after flying to Singapore. Excellent trains run from Singapore up the Malaysian Peninsula, into Thailand and across to Laos. I had fond memories of the train journey I had taken from Singapore to Bangkok back in 1970 when I had first set off to see the world and I thought it would be great to do it again. On that trip I had followed the regular tourist route up the west coast, but studying the map now I saw that there is an alternate way. Branching off from Kuala Lumpur is another train line known as the 'Jungle Line'.

Little used except by local people, it crosses the Malaysian Peninsula and terminates on the east coast close to the Thai/Malaysian border.

I got off to a fairly bad start – well, I was not even started when, attempting to collect my US dollar travelling cash from the Travelex office at Adelaide Airport, I discovered that I had not, as I thought, already paid for them. (I had been so proud of myself for managing this twenty-first century achievement on the internet, but pride, as I have often been reminded, goes before a fall.) Next I found that I had left my number one credit card – the one with money in it with which I was about to rectify this deficiency – in my other handbag, the one that was right then sitting at home in my wardrobe. How could I have done such a stupid thing? Easily, was the obvious answer. Maybe I am getting past being allowed out on my own. I paid for the dollars with card number two, my back-up card, in which there was no money, only credit.

I had plenty of time to consider the dilemma of how to transfer some funds into card number two when the next hiccup appeared. The plane was declared to be two hours late due to some bother it had encountered in Sydney. I had a deadline of nine pm to meet in Singapore. That was the time my train ticket would be held for me to collect. (in another major triumph on the internet I had established an almost pen pal relationship with a wonderfully helpful woman at Malaysian Rail, who, over a number of emails, had chatted me through the intricacies of the ticketing system.)

Idly flipping through the little red notebook that has accompanied me on many adventures, I noticed the express line phone number for my bank account. I had completely forgotten about that since I had taken up with the internet.



I phoned the number and managed to locate a real person instead of the usual machine and she, bless her, transferred a slab of cash into card number two for me. Problem solved.

Meanwhile Qantas, in its infinite generosity, compensated the delayed passengers languishing in the airport with ten dollars worth of sustenance from the kiosk in the departure lounge. Airport prices ensured that this did not allow for much expansion into high living. Poor payment for two hours in departure mode. I wondered whether a certain nameless Qantas CEO would be happy with a sandwich and a small black coffee for two hours of his time. But I have become philosophical about delays in travelling and always come prepared. No longer allowed to indulge in the highly suspicious practice of knitting, now I carry a book in my handbag. I also found some Singaporean students from Adelaide University to talk to. They told me that it was holiday time and they, along with many other students, were on their way home for the break.

Finally airborne, the plane made up some time and we arrived in Singapore only an hour late. Entry formalities were swift. I sprinted straight through immigration and into a taxi that sped me to the train station, a twenty-minute drive away. By then it was almost nine. I'd had the sense to pick up some Singapore dollars along with my US cash in Adelaide Airport and this saved some time. The exchange rate had been good at 1.25 to the Australian dollar. The ticket seller at the train station wasn't my nice friend of the internet chats; he grumpily demanded to know why I hadn't collected my ticket before this. But he gave it to me anyway.

I had pre-booked a room at the Royal Peacock Hotel in Chinatown. At \$105 it was one of the cheapest I could find apart from the backpacker hostels that were all too far from the railway station for an early morning exit. I find

Singapore pretty expensive these days. As the taxi weaved and threaded its way through the tiny, crowded streets of Chinatown, the driver dropped dark hints about this location's respectability, or lack thereof. The Royal Peacock is one of the old Chinese shop-houses, many of which were former brothels that have been sanitised and born again as small hotels. As I waited for attention at its front desk in the cramped foyer, I suspected that the Royal Peacock might not have quite made the transition to absolute decorum. Some of its previous infamy appeared to linger; a man beside me was negotiating a price for a stay of a couple of hours.

Finally turning her unenthusiastic attention to me, the receptionist gave me an off-hand greeting and waved me in the vague direction of the lift. I dragged my bag to my closet of a room, so dark I couldn't see into the cupboards or my bag when I opened it on the bed. Dingy and in bad repair, nothing in that room worked – all the switches and knobs were broken or seized in one position, including those of the air-conditioner, which were set firmly on freezing and couldn't be turned down. Worse, the operation of the shower was complicated and it produced just a trickle of hot water. I was not amused.

I slept poorly. If I turned off the air-conditioner I suffocated, but with it on I froze. I gave up and got up at five am, which was a good thing as the wake-up call I had ordered didn't come. I had also arranged a taxi at reception the night before. This was a mistake. The same type of taxi that had made the trip from the train station for four dollars the night before had now metamorphosed into the Hotel Limousine and cost five times as much to return there.

But at last I was at the grand old Singapore Railway Station in Keppel Road. I love this wonderful colonial art deco remnant. Built by the Malaysian Transport Authority

in 1932 on land leased for 999 years from the Singaporean government, it is huge, lofty and spacious. I entered the station's vast central waiting hall with its soaring domed roof and large windows that give it a splendid feeling of openness and light. The walls between the windows are hung with large painted pictures of Malaysian life – workers planting rice, tapping rubber trees, mining tin and driving bullock carts. These panels and the floor blocks are made of a particular type of rubber that deadens noise, adding to the feeling of calm in the hall.

Rows of seats line the sides of the waiting hall, but there was still plenty of open space to glide my bag across the smooth floor. I had no problem finding my way around. At the end of the hall are two large signs, Arrivals and Departures, and the train lines, covered by umbrella-shaped concrete roofs, proceed out or in from there. But first I gravitated to the food court on one side of the hall. At one stall I watched a local breakfast specialty being made. As a thin, flat pancake was cooking on a hot griddle, an egg was broken over it, then topped with a slice of cheese. I bought two. I was ravenous. Arriving too late for a meal at the hotel the night before, I'd had no further chance of food since the meagre rations I'd received on the plane. I thoroughly enjoyed my breakfast, and washed it down with a mug of strong black coffee to jump-start the day.

Afterwards I waited on a bench beside the departure sign until a pair of metal grilled doors clanged open, my ticket was checked, and I was allowed to advance to my seat on the train.

Soon we were on our way. The passenger seated beside me was an interesting British woman. She told me that she now lived in Switzerland where she worked for a pharmaceutical company doing research on malarial prophylactics, mainly Artemis, a product derived from the wormwood

plant. I found this fascinating. Combating the ever-lurking malarial bugs when travelling is a burden I can do without.

It doesn't take long to cross the island of Singapore; its total land mass is only 581 square kilometres. From the Keppel Street train station on the far side of the island we soon arrived at the Johor–Singapore Causeway that leads to Malaysia. The causeway, which is roughly a kilometre long, was opened in 1923. Before the causeway connecting the island to the mainland was built, passengers and goods came across the island on a local train, were conveyed by ferry to the Malaysian Peninsula and then transferred onto a Malaysian train. Now border formalities are completed at Tanjong Pagar, on the end of Singapore Island, and the train rumbles onto the causeway and proceeds into Malaysia. Sadly, the crossing of the causeway did not delight me the way it had when first I had come this way. Then, travelling over water in a train to reach another country had been a new and exciting experience for a novice traveller. I'd had a sleeping compartment in a terrific old British train with wood panelling and little table lamps with fringed shades. I still have vivid memories of the bright blue sea that had sparkled on either side of the train on the narrow causeway. But now, heavy traffic on the road that ran beside the train line almost occluded the sight of the sea, and this day the sky was overcast and what water I could see was dull and grey.

Once we reached Malaysia, however, I cheered up, pleasantly surprised that large tracts of the country still appeared untouched. There were masses of vegetation, mainly palms, and lots of water in the form of streams and ponds. After poor, parched Australia's long, dry drought, this utterly green world was breathtaking; wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling luxurious emerald and jade, it rolled away as far as I could see.

After a while the train's dining car opened for business and I smartly lined up to offer my custom. Although the rest of this train was modern and the cafeteria car was gaily decked out with bright blue tables and red plastic seats, it was not air-conditioned. Lingering was not an option – the cooking was done in situ, in a cubbyhole behind the counter. Meals were limited to either a rice or a noodle dish. I had both, but for decency's sake and in an attempt to disguise my gluttony I waited an hour between them. I also tried for coffee but failed. Coffee came pre-packaged and heavily sugared. It could not be separated. Whatever do diabetics do in this country? I got funny looks when I asked for '*tidak gulas*' or '*sensa manis*' – no sugar or not sweet.

The train was comfortable and the journey was pleasant enough, but it seemed to last a lot longer than the eight hours it did take. Even though it had been described as an express, this train stopped frequently and we were an hour late into Kuala Lumpur. The conductor, a cheerful young Malaysian man, told me along the way that the problem was with the train. I asked, 'Is it *sakit* – sick?' He laughed and said, 'Yes, that is why we go slower.'

The new Kuala Lumpur train station is rather like a miniature Changi Airport, three massive floors with shops and stalls galore. I did a couple of circuits of most of it before I located the booking office where I had been told to collect the ticket I had reserved via the internet. I was taking the train from Kuala Lumpur that travels the Jungle Line, traversing the peninsula and heading for the east coast. I intended to get off at Wakif Bharu, the nearest station to the Thai border, from where I could cross into Thailand and get a train to Bangkok.

The staff at the ticket office had trouble finding my booking. Punching my name into the computer did not

work until I realised that the ticket might have been lodged under any combination of my three names – my family name not necessarily being obvious to a Malaysian. Suggesting that it could be listed under my first name, I left them to it and wandered off to change some money.

## 2 In training

When I came back my ticket had materialised and I was delighted to find that costs in Malaysia were refreshingly inexpensive after Singapore's excesses. My first-class sleeper on the Malaysian train had cost a pittance.

Dropping my bag at the left luggage office, I went exploring and came upon the VIP lounge. Here, those exalted members of society who possess a first-class ticket can rest and refresh themselves in comfort. At last I had made it to VIP status! I was certainly not passing up this opportunity. Installing myself on a plush couch in a huge room that came complete with showers and a giant TV screen, I wallowed in opulence. After a wash and a rest I played with my little travelling computer, inserting its plug adapter into the TV's wall socket to connect it. This was more than the station staff had bothered to do. Rather than spend a couple of dollars on an adaptor for the super-duper TV's plug, someone had merely bent its prongs and forced them into the slots. Nice.

Later, on the prowl for nourishment again, I located an immense food hall. Circulating around the numerous stalls I chose a meal by the 'look and point' method. Rows of taps and basins for hand-washing lined both walls of the hall. What a good idea. We should do this in Australia. Although it is more necessary in Malaysia, where it is accepted practice to use your fingers to eat with instead

of cutlery. A naturally messy eater, I would like to see this custom universally adopted. It would save a lot of shirt cleaning and washing up.

Then it was on to investigate the shops, among which were several big shoe outlets sporting a great selection of sandals. I found several pairs that I would have liked to buy but they were all too wide for my skinny feet. But I did splash out and, for the princely sum of one Malaysian dollar (three to an Australian), became the proud owner of a terrifically gaudy hair clip.

At eight in the evening my train was announced and I made an easy departure. Riding down an escalator, I skimmed along the smooth platform and hopped into the carriage where my admirable cabin awaited. The bed had been made up ready for me, with crisp white sheets, a blanket and a pillow with a snowy cover on which two cellophane-wrapped choccie biscuits nested. There was a hand basin on the wall, on the rim of which two bottles of drinking water stood – as a warning against drinking from the tap I presumed – a chair, a small pull-down table, a bin and, oh what a blessing, air-conditioning that I could turn down.

I woke at five am when the train stopped for a long time at a station, and I didn't sleep again. It was dawn and now I could see the country we were traversing. It contained large areas of wilderness, interspersed with an occasional rubber plantation and now and then great patches of land that had been stripped – the red earth showing through like raw wounds – ready for palms to be planted for palm oil production.

The countryside appeared sparsely populated. Some of the small train stations we passed through were abandoned and derelict, the buildings and houses only shells; holes in their walls where windows had once been were now sightless eyes that watched the jungle encroaching. Trains no