

COFFEE COUNTRY

Daniel Allen discovers the beauty and the beans on Laos's Bolaven Plateau



Ariya Dengkayaphichith, general manager of the Jhai Coffee Farmers' Cooperative (JCFC), bends down to grab a handful of rich red soil. 'This is what makes coffee from Laos special,' he says, letting it trickle slowly through his fingers. 'Here on the Bolaven Plateau we're standing inside the bowl of a giant extinct volcano. This is the most fertile place for hundreds of miles.'

Plantations on the Bolaven Plateau, a beautiful tableland in the south-east of Laos close to the Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese borders, produce 95 per cent of the country's coffee crop. Endowed with a cool climate, regular rainfall and abundant nutrients, this elevated region is a coffee planter's utopia – some specialists say the plateau may just be the best place for coffee growing in the whole of Southeast Asia.

Daniel Allen

'A pristine natural environment is essential for producing fine coffee,' says Koffie, an appropriately named Dutchman and coffee fanatic who moved to the Bolaven after recognising its potential. 'Growers generally don't need to use chemicals round here because the soil is just so good, which means most beans are actually organic. Farming has never been that intensive either, which is perfect for sustainable production.'

In a league table of coffee-producing countries, Laos is a mere footnote. Compared to neighboring Vietnam, now the world's second largest coffee exporter after Brazil with production of 1.1 million tonnes last year, this landlocked nation is but one bean in a very large bag. Yet those who visit Laos today quickly come to appreciate what a growing number of those in the global coffee industry are discovering – coffee grown on the Bolaven Plateau can be good, sometimes very good.

The history of coffee in Laos is inextricably linked to colonialism, geopolitics and war. The French, ➤



Cultural legacy: an image of a dancer at Angkor Wat. The Khmer Rouge sought to wipe out those involved in this and other art forms





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looking for a way to make this corner of empire profitable, first introduced coffee from Vietnam to the Bolaven Plateau in the early 20th century. Commercially successful harvests started in the 1930s, when the upper echelons of society would decamp to their Bolaven plantations every summer to escape the fierce heat of Vientiane, the Laotian capital.

The outbreak of the World War II saw many Bolaven plantations deserted by their owners, and production was hit further in the 1950s when disease and frost combined to decimate remaining coffee bushes. Although farmers on the plateau switched from using Arabica bushes to more disease-resistant and easier-to-grow Robusta plants, any serious recovery was then prevented by ravages wrought during the Vietnam War.

From 1964 to 1973 the US dropped more than two million tonnes of bombs on Laos in an attempt to destroy North Vietnamese supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trail passed through the Bolaven Plateau, and many Laotians were either killed or chose to flee the area completely. Even today starting a new plantation carries considerable risk, with large quantities of unexploded ordnance (UXO) still waiting for an often-fatal slip of the hand or hoe.

At the end of the Vietnam War many Laotian families relocated back to the Bolaven Plateau, and the mixed fortunes of the country's coffee industry began to rise again. For years various development agencies and the Laotian government have been working with farmers to introduce high-yield Arabica plants; the Laotian coffee harvest currently stands at around 25,000 tonnes a year, a quarter of which is Arabica.

Today, although it lacks the grandeur of colonial times, the town of Paksong has risen from the ashes to become the unofficial coffee capital of the Bolaven Plateau once more. Traveling out to Paksong from provincial capital Pakse on Route 23, also known as the 'Coffee Road', plots containing a mix of waist-high Arabica bushes and taller, spindly Robusta plants line the road, as overloaded tractors ferry locals to and from plantations.

Workers on Bolaven coffee plantations tend to come from the Laven tribe, one of many ethnic groups that live in the area. It is the Laven people, whose ancestors were part of the great Khmer empire that flourished from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, who gave the Bolaven – which means 'home of the Laven' in Lao – its name. Katu and Alak tribes also grow coffee; drying harvested beans on the ground or on platforms next to their picturesque thatched villages.

While the rising productivity of the Bolaven Plateau has made some people rich, most of the local population remains rooted in poverty. Widespread illiteracy and ignorance of the international coffee market have made some farmers an easy target for companies looking to turn a quick profit. Many farmers take out high interest loans with traders to get started, and are then unable to save any money to invest in the next coffee-growing season.

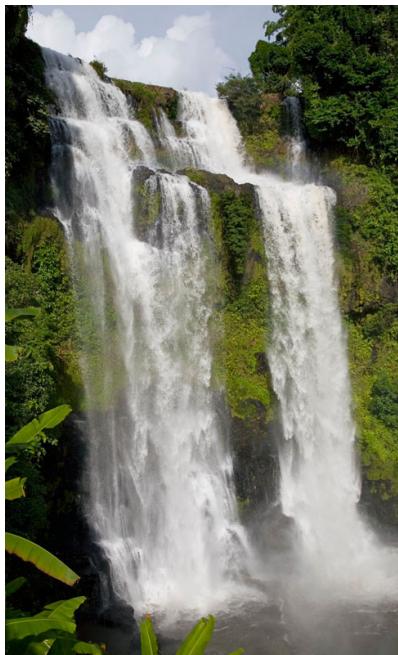
Founded in 2001, the JCFC has already gone a long way to helping Bolaven Plateau coffee farmers break the debt cycle and increase their income. 'Our goal is to give farmers and their families a better life,' says Ariya Dengkayaphichith. 'We educate them about the coffee market and teach



INSIDE ASIA

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them how to manage their farms better. We're also working to raise the quality of coffee being produced here so that it has a good reputation.'

One of the JCFC's goals is to stop farmers borrowing money from traders, who often demand repayment in coffee beans. Paying off high-interest debts to traders with coffee beans leaves less to sell the JCFC or even on the open market, where they receive a far better price. If necessary, farmers can borrow from the JCFC at an interest rate of just 0.6%, less than the typical rate of microfinance lending, and way less than the usual 10% rate charged by traders.

The advent of mobile phones and internet connections, coupled with JCFC initiatives, means Bolaven farmers today are already way more market-savvy. 'We sign contracts with our farmers after discussing world prices,' says Ariya. 'Before 2000 they had no knowledge of world prices, only the trader's price. Now they can bargain harder with the traders, even during out-of-contract negotiations.'

The JCFC now involves 550 households in 12 Bolaven villages, and revenues in 2008 stood at US\$ 260,000, ten times more than in 2004. The vast majority of this money goes back to the farmers, who are able to invest in new homes, tractors and education for their children.

'Before the Jhai Coffee Farmers' Cooperative (JCFC) was established we had to sell our coffee beans to the Dao Heuang Company,' says one villager, wishing to remain anonymous. 'They bought up all the competition and then lowered the price for buying beans. We didn't want to sell to them, but if we

didn't we couldn't eat or pay back our loans. JCFC's requirements for beans are a lot stricter, but the price is much fairer. I've almost doubled my income this year.'

A major milestone in the development of the JCFC was gaining Fair Trade certification in 2005, the first producer group in Laos to receive this distinction, and farmers are now guaranteed a good global price set in New York. This in turn has attracted companies such as the Joma Bakery Café, which runs an expanding chain of popular cafes in Southeast Asia.

'We only use coffee from the JCFC,' says Joma co-owner Jonathan Blair. 'They're committed to fair trade and organic practices. Using co-op coffee helps ensure the farmers are being paid fairly. We love the principal of the farmer working their own land for a fair price as compared to day wage employees working for a corporate farm and not knowing how they are treated.'

Aside from coffee, the indigenous tribes of the Bolaven are benefiting from a raft of other initiatives too. With its majestic waterfalls and colorful ethnic culture, the plateau is seeing a rise in international visitors, and ecotourism companies such as Green Discovery Laos give a portion of their

proceeds back to local communities. Various 'eco-lodges' have sprung up, most of which employ local people and pay them a decent salary.

Canadian NGO Global Association for People and the Environment (Gape) has been working on behalf of Bolaven villagers since 2001. 'Education is really

the key to empowering these people,' explains Gape programme manager Gerry Duckitt, based in Pakse. 'Being better educated enables them to better understand information about the changing situation around them, analyze situations, and make informed decisions. With large-scale commercial agriculture land concessions on the plateau rising, it's essential everyone understands their rights.'

Gape is also working to conserve villagers' cultures and their environment, with projects to record native music, promote exchanges between the old and the young, develop written scripts, and sell locally-made products such as honey, rugs and jewelry. Environmental conservation includes community forestry, fish protection zones, and inclusion of indigenous peoples in the management of national protected areas.

As the JCFC, Gape and other philanthropic organisations continue to expand their influence, the future of the Bolaven Plateau and its inhabitants looks brighter than it has for a long time. While development brings its own

HOW TO GET THERE

The nearest major town (and airport) to the Bolaven Plateau is Pakse. Bangkok Airways run flights to Bangkok, while Lao airlines fly to Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Vientiane and Luang Prabang. There is also an overnight luxury bus service connecting Vientiane and Pakse, and direct buses to Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia.

TAKE THE TOUR

To reach the Bolaven Plateau from Pakse either take an organized tour with a Pakse-based travel agent (such as Green Discovery Laos), or rent a motorbike in Pakse (\$8-10 per day). Main roads are good, and to really explore the numerous waterfalls and villages mobility is essential. Maps of the area are available in most of Pakse's guesthouses and hotels - depending on their itinerary many people choose to overnight in guesthouses in the plateau's larger villages, towns and major scenic spots (such as waterfalls).

FIND OUT MORE

For more information about Paksong and its environs see www.paksong.info. Dutchman Koffie runs an excellent coffee-roasting workshop (see site for more details).

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