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COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 transitions: case study on the Lao PDR

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this review paper is to investigate the consequences of tourism development and economic growth within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, focusing specifically on Lao PDR post-pandemic. The adverse effect of COVID-19 on tourism and economic sectors has been pervasive across the ASEAN region, with varying degrees of impact. Some of these difficulties are set to continue, though there are positive signs of recovery and of the resilience of the tourism industry. Utilising case material from Lao PDR in Southeast Asia – an area frequently neglected in tourism studies – the paper sheds light on the post-pandemic landscape to address existing gaps in the current literature.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study approach was taken in this review paper, utilising secondary data such as media reports, official reports from Tourism Laos and international governing bodies like United Nations and the World Bank to form a viewpoint discussion in the Lao PDR post-pandemic condition.

Findings – This paper reveals that contrary to a long period of recovery post-pandemic, there has been a degree of continuity from the pre-pandemic period. Considerable numbers of backpackers have returned to Vang Vieng, along with Vientiane and Luang Prabang. While the pre-pandemic emphasis on mass tourism persists, there is also an increased focus on regional and domestic markets. Laos, with its strategic location and cross-border connections, aims to take advantage of this shift.

Originality/value – The paper highlights a detailed exploration of the Lao tourism industry post-pandemic. It goes beyond the initial expectations in literature of a complete transformation post-pandemic, highlighting the continuity in visitor sources and traditional tourist attractions. It emphasises the Lao PDR strategic position for market reorientation, providing insight into the nation's adaptive strategies and a nuanced perspective on the evolving landscape of Lao tourism.

Keywords Tourism, Post-Covid recovery, Transitions, Lao PDR, Southeast Asia

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The Southeast Asian context

The COVID-19 pandemic has eased, restrictions on movement have been removed, travel across borders has become less difficult, lockdowns and social distancing have ceased, but

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the virus and its mutations have not disappeared; though they are generally less severe, infections are still with us, as are deaths from the virus. Despite the ongoing impact of the pandemic on tourism, the availability of vaccines and rising levels of immunity have spurred a recovery in both domestic and international tourism (Ullah & Haji-Othman Covid-19, 2021). While the sector has not fully returned to its pre-pandemic state, tourism businesses have reopened, albeit not all due to bankruptcies and closures.

COVID-19 cases continue to occur daily along with deaths, but not at the rapid rate witnessed in 2020 and 2021. They fell considerably from the second half of 2022 with some blips and even more so from February 2023. As of 15 February 2024, cases worldwide stood at 703, 204, 807 and deaths at 6,983,283 (Worldometer, 2024). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states have reported a total of 36,972,185 cases since the pandemic began to spread in early 2020, and a total number of deaths at 369,477, with the most recorded cases in Vietnam (11,624,114), Indonesia (6,828,220) and Malaysia (5.272,717); the most deaths in Indonesia (162,033), the Philippines (66,864) and Vietnam (43,206); Lao PDR (henceforth Laos/Lao) only reported 218,927 cases, the ninth lowest of the ten ASEAN countries, with 758 deaths; Cambodia, the lowest, in the number of cases, only 139,088, but with 3,056 deaths, and therefore, above the Laos' death rate. Brunei Darussalam, with 342,260 cases, had the lowest number of deaths in ASEAN, at 225, but the small size of the population at around 450,000 needs to be taken into account.

However, there is a problem of the reliability of the statistical data, because levels of testing vary considerably across ASEAN, as does the robustness of data collection. Laos was the lowest in testing per million of population (164,865) along with Cambodia (180,062), Myanmar (210,804) and Thailand (246, 488). Therefore, four mainland countries (Vietnam being the exception) tested below a quarter of their population per million. The Philippines only managed to test under a third of its population, and Indonesia a little over 40%. Singapore at over 4 million, Malaysia at over 2 million and Brunei at 1.6 million had relatively efficient testing regimes. In more remote rural areas and where medical facilities and testing kits were less accessible and infrastructure less developed, it is likely that many cases went unreported or were wrongly diagnosed. In fact, there are also frequent problems in determining whether a death is caused by the virus or by other conditions and complicating factors.

ASEAN tourism saw 135.17 million visitors in 2018, reaching a peak at 143.61 million in 2019. However, the COVID-19 impact was evident as arrivals sharply declined to 26.16 million in 2020 and hit a record low of 2.95 million in 2021 (Statista, 2023a). Tourism in ASEAN showed signs of recovery in 2022, with January–June 2023 recording 46.5 million visitors, 43% from the region. An ASEAN statistical brief in November 2023 entitled "The Slow Path to Recovery", with a "lacklustre" performance in 2022 and a "modest recovery" in the first half of 2023 (from January to June), suggested that visitor arrivals may reach 80–85% of pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2023, though this will vary between countries (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023a).

For January to November 2023, Cambodia led in visitor arrival recovery at 92.4%, followed by Vietnam and Indonesia at 82.25 and 74.11%, respectively. Malaysia received 26 million, Thailand 24.6 million and the Philippines 4.6 million international tourists. Vietnam recorded 12.6 million arrivals, with major sources being South Korea, People's Republic of China (PRC) mainland China, Taiwan, the USA and Japan. Between January and October 2023, Singapore recorded 11.3 million arrivals, Indonesia 9.9 million and Cambodia 4.4 million. Figures for Laos from January to September 2023 record 2.4 million, and between January and August 2023, Myanmar arrivals totalled 751,000. At that time, there were no official figures for Brunei for 2023 (Karantzvelou, 2024, and see ASEAN Skyline, 2023). On this basis, it is likely that the total will reach around 100 million visitors by year end – overall 70% of the 2019 total.

In its *Annual Report 2022–2023: ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth,* it states that tourism in the region is "experiencing positive growth", and it refers to plans for the post-pandemic future in *The Framework on Sustainable Tourism Development in ASEAN in the Post-COVID-19 Era*, agreed in early 2023 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b, p. 29; 2023c). Positive post-pandemic progress calling for "a more innovative and competitive tourism" was also reported at the 26th Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers in Yogyakarta on 4 February 2023 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023d). The regrowth of the tourism industry is hardly surprising, when the statistics for visitor arrivals in 2021 totalled 2.949 million, and only Indonesia (1,557,500), Thailand (472,000) and Singapore (330,900) attracted more than 300,000 visitors. Intra-ASEAN cross-border movements accounted for almost a million. Laos did not submit a return for 2021, compared with its arrivals of 4.791 million in 2019, suggesting that these were negligible, following a figure of 886,447 for 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022).

However, the total for "The Number of Visitor Arrivals by ASEAN Member States 2022" is misleading. ASEAN provides a figure of 43.2 million, with intra-ASEAN visitors comprising almost 50% of the movements. However, the figures for Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Myanmar relate to 2021 and that for Vietnam is 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023e). More reliable figures for 2023 show that visitor arrivals to ASEAN for the first half of the year reached 46.5 million, with 43% coming from ASEAN, 8.2% from mainland China, 8.1% from South Korea and 6.9% from the European Union (EU) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022).

Countries in ASEAN with substantial tourism industries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam show a more optimistic outlook of sustained "revival," "recovery" and "acceleration" in tourism (The Diplomat, 2023; and see JLL, 2023; UNWTO [United Nations World Tourism Organization], 2023). However, reforms, adaptation, diversification of inbound destinations, promotion of domestic and regional tourism and addressing labour challenges are still necessary (OECD iLibrary, 2023). Even among the countries with a large tourism sector, there have been differences in levels of performance and success (Outbox, 2023; UNWTO, 2023).

The contribution of travel and tourism to ASEAN's gross domestic product (GDP) experienced a substantial decline post-2019, dropping from US$379.9bn to approximately 50% less in 2020 (US$180.21bn) and further decreasing to US$148.25bn in 2021. A positive trend emerged in 2022, reaching US$241.7bn, with a forecast of around US$306.4bn for 2023 (Statista, 2023b). In particular, domestic tourism expenditure in Southeast Asia, a significant contribution to GDP, decreased to US$100.82bn in 2021 but rebounded to US$145.9bn in 2022 (Statista, 2023c).

The future trajectory remains uncertain. The *ASEAN Travel Agreement* signed in November 2022 emphasises closer government–private sector collaboration to improve tourism sector efficiency and competitiveness, facilitate intra-ASEAN and international travel, joint marketing and promotion, safety and security of tourists and the development of human resources. However, in the post-pandemic era, the domestic and wider Asian market is being given emphasis; member states tend to focus on their own national promotional campaigns, and the safety and security of tourists in most ASEAN countries are not generally well-resourced and equipped. Developing human resources in the ASEAN tourism sector proves challenging, particularly as a portion of workers operate in the informal sector, not affiliated with tourism-related entities, and operate outside the institutions which preside over tourism (ASEAN Tourism Sector, 2020).

The *Post-COVID-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism* is even more demanding than some of the proposals and principles set down by the ASEAN Tourism Sector (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). Given the kinds of tourism that are offered and the socio-economic factors in Southeast Asia, particularly affecting migrant labourers, rural populations, ethnic minorities, manual workers and those with lower skills, a lack of government support alongside resource and finance constraints during the pandemic, certain of the proposals seem to be more hopeful than realistic, though they are necessary, such as the need to improve communication across countries, sectors and between the public and private sectors (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

Other proposals entail considerable funding and support, the necessary skills and training and a committed, efficient and well-organised set of agencies and institutions to turn policy into practice and ensure funds go to the most appropriate people who need support and will produce results. *The Recovery Plan* also includes: the need to embrace digital technology and innovative solutions (this is often a reaction to difficult circumstances, and there have been spectacular failures in this area); “health patrols” to improve visitor safety and security (in a post-pandemic situation requiring the extension of more basic health care for the local population, then tourist health patrols might seem a luxury); the reinvention of tourist services (this usually comes from the private sector and entrepreneurs, though government is important in providing infrastructure and appropriate funding and support); the need for preparedness and resilience for future crises (resilience is certainly a quality shown in various tourism sectors in Southeast Asia in the face of past crises, but whether governments can truly prepare themselves and their citizens for the unexpected is a moot-point, and with climate change and accompanying natural and environmental disasters, then preparing for pandemics, with very little knowledge of what to expect in the way of global viruses and transmutations in particular, is highly problematic); enabling sustainable and inclusive recovery (sustainability is another difficult issue, and when post-pandemic mass tourism returns, as seems to be happening, then sustainability for those involved in welcoming large numbers of tourists is not something that is uppermost in their minds) and providing the right levels of support for the sector (resources are finite, choices have to be made and some sectors in a given country might well be unable to be funded and supported, whichever policies and plans are in place).

Methodology

A case study approach was taken in this review paper, utilising secondary data such as media reports, official reports from Tourism Laos and international governing bodies like United Nations and the World Bank to form a viewpoint discussion in the Lao PDR post-pandemic condition. The data are analysed based on the available post-COVID-19 data on Lao PDR, and most articles are based from 2020 till 2023 to capture the pandemic and post-pandemic data. Additionally, some data were also taken from 2016 onwards to ensure the accuracy of the pre-pandemic situation.

Post-pandemic tourism: Lao PDR

The context and background. In many areas of academic investigation, “land-locked” Laos has been neglected, especially in tourism studies. It is characterised by ethnic and cultural diversity and striking and varied geo-physical landscapes. The country has experienced significant transformations, shifting from a command to a more open economy, addressing challenges such as migration, economic changes through market integration and the impact of social and cultural globalisation. In examining migration, rural-urban relations, poverty and resilience, livelihoods and rural development, Rigg captures these processes in terms of “living with transition” (Rigg, 2005). This notion of “transition” is also apposite in considering tourism and its post-COVID-19 condition.

What is significant in a post-pandemic Southeast Asia is that, as a land-locked country, Laos is surrounded by several neighbours, all of them demographically larger and three of them economically stronger. Examining perceptions and characterisations of Laos, Rigg refers to it “as forgotten land, lost, half-formed and remote” (Rigg, 2005, p. 46). Yet, as his work also demonstrates, its peripheral status, wedged between five other countries, gives it an integrating role in mainland Southeast Asia where peoples from other countries meet and intermingle, not least in the tourism sector. On the northern border, there is China and to the north-west Myanmar; Vietnam shares the whole of the Laos’ eastern border and Cambodia to the south, with Thailand located on most of the Laos’ western border. The connections with Thailand are expressed in the four Thai-Lao “Friendship Bridges” across the Mekong.

This is an interesting, though possibly a precarious, position for Laos. It is interesting in the field of post-pandemic tourism development, as the country is surrounded by important sources of tourists and tourism revenue, particularly from China and Thailand, and to a lesser extent Vietnam, but precarious, in that it could become a target for tourism exploitation and marginalisation by larger and more economically powerful neighbours. Yet, with the post-COVID-19 shift in emphasis in Southeast Asia to domestic and regional tourism, Laos is ideally placed to take advantage of its location and to attract tourists in larger numbers from surrounding countries and to perform an “integrative function”.

In the study of tourism in Laos, significant publications are few and far between. A useful comparative study on the development of tourism in Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, as their borders and economies opened up to international visitors, was undertaken by Hall, when arrivals in Laos were moving towards the 1,000,000 mark (Hall, 2000). After 15 years of tourism expansion from 1990 when the first national tourism development plan was published and visitor arrivals numbered a meagre 14,000, through the second plan in 1998 which witnessed a visitor level at 500,200, and by 2005 (Lao National Tourism Authority [LNTA], 2006), the arrivals totalled 1,095,315, generating US$146m in tourism receipts and comprising 7 to 9% of GDP (Tourism Development Department, 2021; Schipani, 2002; Sensathith, 2011; Yamauchi & Lee, 1999). In 2005, a tourism plan was formulated, and in 2006, the Lao Tourism Strategy 2006–2020 was released. It should be noted that in the first two decades of tourism development, Lao statistics are unreliable.

Harrison and Schipani’s (2007, 2009) authoritative overview of Laos’ tourism development highlights sightseeing, eco- and adventure-tourism, pro-poor, community-based and cultural-heritage tourism. Despite patchiness, pro-poor strategies show positive effects among minorities and rural communities. Despite the range of tourism natural and cultural assets available, infrastructure challenges however hinder access, with tourism activities concentrating in specific sites like Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang, the wider Champassak Province and Savannakhet.

> The natural and cultural attractions of Lao PDR are considerable. There are vast areas of tropical monsoon forest, numerous ethnic minorities, unspoiled . . . and a virtually undeveloped hinterland away from the main tourist honeypots (Harrison and Schipani, 2009, p. 182).

There have been a number of publications which address specific issues prior to the pandemic: Nonthapot and Ueasin (2014), on the economic importance of Thai visitors to Laos; Sensathith (2013), who provided an ethnography of tourism and heritage; the Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], (2016), which collected a range of data on Luang Prabang before COVID-19; Zhang and Zhang (2017) on small-scale enterprises and sustainable development; Bounmixay and Ton on tourist attitudes and behaviours towards Laos (2020) and Phommavong on tourism as a means to address poverty (2011). The great promise of an expanding tourism industry in Laos was captured in *The Diplomat* before the pandemic in that the Visit Laos Year 2018 expressed “the hospitality and friendliness of the local people” and that it had developed “a destination image” (Kang, 2018).

The most insightful work on heritage tourism and the perspectives, interpretations and senses that different constituencies bring to it are captured in Berliner’s concept of nostalgia and the notion of a “heritagescape” in the context of Luang Prabang (Berliner, 2012a, b). As a

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site (WHS), Berliner also explores the politics of heritage (2010). Of all Lao tourist sites, Luang Prabang commands attention (Lenaerts, 2016; Vallard, 2016). It has long been established that when a global body like UNESCO intervenes in a site to protect and conserve it, it also transforms the site and "creates aesthetic forms" and "historical narratives" (Berliner, 2012b, p. 234); in other words, it reconstructs and recreates heritage. In preserving it, UNESCO frequently presides over processes of gentrification, the refashioning of buildings, commercialisation, the reorganisation of social and economic relationships for those who live in or near these sites and the attraction of mass tourism (King, 2016).

Since 1990, Laos embarked on a programme of poverty eradication; one of its tools was the promotion of international tourism, supported by overseas aid, to bring in much needed foreign exchange. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) indicated that in 2022, 18.3% of the population were below the National Poverty Line (NPL), approaching 1.5 million citizens. Compared with other ASEAN countries, it had a low annual GDP of US$ 16.1bn in 2022 (ADB, 2023). Funding and loans came from the ADB in Manila, The World Bank, UNESCO, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government aid agencies in Canada, USA, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia, Japan and the Netherlands (SNV, Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers/Foundation of Netherlands Volunteers), among others. By 1995, this strategy became a priority in such fields as ecotourism, and by 1999, tourism had become the country's primary foreign exchange generator (Schipani, 2002).

The pandemic. The impact of the pandemic between mid-2020 and May 2022 was profound. Laos did not have the resources, funds or medical infrastructure to provide support and safety nets for a considerable proportion of its population. It also had the problem of Lao migrant labour working overseas, especially in Thailand, China, Japan and Vietnam, returning home, as well as those from the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on the Lao PDR–Myanmar border (leased for 75 years to a Chinese businessman through an agreement with China). It was estimated that over 200,000 Lao returned in 2020 alone out of an approximate Lao migrant population of 900,000, primarily young males and females between 14 and 24 years of age (Denny & Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). The results comprised social dislocation and stigma (especially for those trafficked), unemployment and financial difficulties both for the returnees and those at home reliant in part on remittances and mental health issues. Any rights and entitlements that they had were almost impossible to access.

A UN-Lao PDR government survey of 1,200 households across 120 communities and 350 micro- and small enterprises in June 2020 stated that:

> The Government of Lao PDR was swift in enacting preventative measures, including an early lockdown and ongoing travel restrictions. This has helped keep the health crisis to a minimum, but it has not insulated the country from the extensive socio-economic impact as domestic and regional supply chains collapsed, along with household incomes and consumer demand (2020, p. ii).

It makes particular reference to Luang Prabang:

> As a province, Luang Prabang has been affected most heavily. During the lockdown, businesses related to tourism lost around 80% of their income compared to the same period in 2019, a situation exacerbated by about 40% of hotel guests being asked to leave hotels at the start of the lockdown without payment. The Luang Prabang Tourism Association estimates 80–90% of its members could go bankrupt without support or an improvement in the situation (Denny & Xayamoungkhoun, 2023, p. 41).

The hotel and restaurant sector was hardest hit when incomes dropped to almost zero, and it is estimated that 80% of the staff were laid off, and a number of hoteliers were desperate to sell their hotels. Those more innovative were switching to the domestic market and offering generous discounts.

Researchers at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reported that in 2020, the Lao economy had experienced its lowest growth rate in 30 years, and its services, tourism and handicrafts were badly affected; the remittances from Lao overseas migrant workers had reduced dramatically, as they returned home without employment (Gunawardena & Phathammavong, 2021). A report by the ADB (2020), based on online questionnaires and operator-assisted phone interviews in August 2019 and May 2020, took a pessimistic view of the immediate future: from March 2020, land borders were closed, international aviation was cancelled, domestic travel was restricted, physical distancing was imposed, tourist visas were suspended, international entry airports were closed, domestic travel across provinces were suspended, businesses were closed and working capital was reduced considerably, but owners were reluctant to borrow, and 70% of employers had reduced their staff, many of them simply dismissed without pay; of the 327 enterprises surveyed, half of them had temporarily closed. The summary of this crisis was that "the onset of COVID-19 is expected to have a devastating impact on tourism enterprises in the Lao PDR" (Takashi *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report in October 2021 put the decline in visitor arrivals at 74% from 2019 and the revenue loss at 70% to 80%, keeping in mind the contribution of the tourism industry to the Lao economy of US$ 934m and employment at around 300,000 (UNDP, 2021). These pressures continued after the UNDP report until recovery began in mid-2022 so that the decline would have been even greater beyond October 2021.

A report on the impact of COVID-19 in January 2022 based on research into workers at major Lao tourism sites (Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang and Pakse) indicated that the majority of women and older workers were badly affected in that they were often unaware of their rights or entitlements and were even reluctant to assert these; some male workers were more inclined to do so. Another category of workers that suffered were those with low levels of education, lacking transferable skills (Rassopong, Failor, & Phalkhanh, 2022; Luxembourg Aid & Development [LuxDev], 2021). It was found that labour laws and rules set down in government documents were unclear, unknown or ignored. A considerable number of individuals received no compensation or benefits, or continued "virtual employment" with no pay to tide them over the crisis; while the more fortunate had their pay cut by 20 to 50%, many were summarily dismissed without notice or severance pay (Rassopong *et al.*, 2022). One of the consequences of these problems was that Laos' socio-economic inequalities increased dramatically; many micro-, small and medium-sized businesses were closed and some were rendered bankrupt. The most severe impacts were experienced in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

A report from the World Bank emphasised that during the pandemic, over two-thirds of households reduced their education levels in that many of them did not have access to online delivery or were they capable of teaching and instructing their children at home ([The] World Bank, 2022).

A number of studies relating to policy and practice in the tourism sector which preceded the pandemic became rapidly dated, though not entirely irrelevant, given the enormity of the results of the actions that governments had to take to attempt to contain the spread of the virus (Luxembourg Aid & Development [LuxDev], 2021).

Lao PDR: post-pandemic. Laos reopened its borders to foreign visitors on 9, May 2022. It withdrew its previous quarantine requirements for those travellers who presented clear evidence of vaccination. Laos' travel operators, hotels and restaurants, at least those that had survived the pandemic, were preparing for an anticipated influx of visitors. During the pandemic, and after identifying the first case of COVID-19 in March 2020, Laos enforced a first lockdown from 1 April 2020, and after a “second wave” of COVID-19 infection, a further lockdown from 22, April 2021.

The Xinhua News Agency article dated in February 2023 highlights Laos’ efforts, led by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, to revive tourism after losses from 2020 to 2022 (Xinhua, 2023a). The ministry’s priority in contributing to economic growth includes improving the quality of facilities, diversifying tourism products, training Chinese and Korean-speaking staff, promoting nature-based tourism and “the greening of tourism” and presenting the cultural and heritage assets of Laos. The Ministry’s Lao Tourism Recovery Plan aims to attract 1.4 million visitors in 2023, with the Laos-China Railway (LCR) from Kunming in Yunnan to Vientiane and expanded Lao Airlines flights to China from Vientiane to Kunming, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chengdu, Changzhou and Hangzhou, contributing significantly to increased Chinese tourism.

The LCR runs from Vientiane to the northern town of Boten, and on the journey north stopping at Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang, Muang Xay and Nateuy, some 1,035 kilometres long to Kunming. The LNTA was anticipating upwards of 370,000 inbound Chinese passengers in 2023. Tickets have to be purchased up to three days in advance, and in the early days of opening, they were sold out at the end of the first day.

The article featured by Xinhua News Agency in November 2023 provides an even more promising picture, suggesting a strong recovery with around 2.4 million visitors in the first nine months of 2023 and a further 400,000 to 800,000 anticipated for the remaining months, bringing the total to somewhere around 3 million. *The Laotian Times* also put a positive gloss on this news, though statistics of visitor arrivals tend to differ (Xinhua, 2023b).

The anticipated Visit Laos Year 2024 aims to attract approximately 4.6 million visitors, generating around US$712m. Despite being slightly below the 2019 figures, the projection surpasses the earlier 2023 estimate of 1.4 million visitors. The LCR and “Friendship Bridges” across the Mekong are emphasised as key gateways for tourism, connecting strategic points. With ongoing and planned bridge constructions, including the completion of the sixth bridge by 2025, Laos is positioned as a central hub for regional tourism. The first bridge from Nong Khai Province to Vientiane Prefecture (opened in 1994); the second, Mukdahan Province to Savannakhet Province (operating from 2007); the third, from Nakhon Phanom Province to Thakhek, Khammouane Province (opened in 2011); the fourth bridge from Chiang Khong District in Chiang Rai Province to Ban Houayxay, Bokeo Province (taking traffic from 2013); the fifth from Bueng Kan Province to Pakxan Town, Bolikhamxai Province (to be opened by 2024) and the sixth bridge from Nan Tan District, Ubon Ratchathani Province to Nakhonpheng District, Saravan Province (completed by 2025). There is a further bridge planned and under discussion to connect Loei Province to Vientiane Prefecture.

The Mekong forms the western boundary between Thailand and Laos and the number of available bridge crossings suggests that there will be an increasing flow of Thai tourists. Taken together with the LCR and the land crossings from Vietnam and Cambodia, in addition to flights within the region and to East Asia (China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Taiwan and Hong Kong), the potential for Laos as a centre for regional tourism is enhanced.

In addition, there are six official land crossings from Vietnam to Laos, and four of them are also established bus routes from Hue, Hanoi, Hoi An, Ho Chi Minh City, Nghe An and Da Nang to major Lao cities and towns including Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang. These cross from Vietnam at Tay Tiong to Sop Hun, Cau Treo to Nam Phao, Lao Bao to Dansavanh and Nam Can to Nam Khan. A bus journey from Hanoi to Vientiane takes around 24 hours. The two further connections are between Ngoc Hi to Boy Y and Napao to Cha Lo. There is only one official crossing from Cambodia from Tropaeng Kreal to Nong Nok Khiene.

Tourism in Vientiane is recuperating especially from Thailand, China and Vietnam with increased activity along the Mekong’s riverside establishments. Most hotels are experiencing higher occupancy rates, and Vientiane is now on popular package routes between Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Vientiane, being a major gateway to the country, sees around 3 million visitors in 2023 (Tourism Laos, 2023).

Vang Vieng is rapidly approaching pre-pandemic levels, with busy hostels and budget hotels offering adventure and sports activities (see Bichler, 2009 on backpackers). The streets and hostels in early 2023 were teeming with young Caucasians, primarily from Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with smaller numbers from Japan, South Korea, China and Taiwan.

Luang Prabang, situated on a peninsula between the conjoining of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers, is a renowned town known for its WHS status. It was inscribed on the WHS list on 9 December 1995 (World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, 2023) and attracted around 780,000 visitors in the first nine months of 2023. Of these, approximately 178,000 were domestic tourists, expressing the importance of the city as a national religious site for pilgrimage and obeisance; it has some 33 temples in the heritage area, and 16 of them are of particular importance, with the mix and, in some cases, the hybridisation of Lao, Thai and Khmer styles (Tourism Laos, 2023; Valente, 2020).

The pandemic that devastated the Lao economy and its tourist sector has left its mark. A World Bank survey reveals that 90% of family businesses have reopened or initiated new ventures, but income remains below pre-pandemic levels. Inflation and increased prices for fuel and food have led over half of households to cut spending on health, food and education. Around 42% of households stated that their children had stopped attending classes temporarily or permanently, and 23% were experiencing severe food insecurity (The World Bank, 2022).

Conclusion

During the pandemic, there was extreme pessimism about the future of tourism, not only in Laos. Vaccinations had not yet become available, and, when they did, a significant number of countries, particularly in the developing world, found it difficult to access the necessary supplies of vaccine. The likelihood was that the tourism industry would never be the same again; it would experience a transition to something else, and there would be a long period of recovery. But this has not happened, or it has not happened to the extent that was predicted (see Kim & King, 2020a, b; King, 2021). In the case of Laos, there has been a degree of continuity from the pre-pandemic period. The same source-countries of inbound visitors have remained the same (China, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, with smaller numbers from other ASEAN member states and from Australia, New Zealand, Europe, the USA and Canada). A considerable number of backpackers have returned to Vang Vieng, and along with Vientiane and Luang Prabang and a few other sites, the major tourist preoccupations have remained the same.

There is, however, a difference in that the emphasis on the regional and domestic market has become more pronounced. Given Laos' central geographical location in mainland Southeast Asia, its cross-border connections with neighbouring countries and the growing number of flights to various Asian destinations, the nation appears well-positioned to leverage this market reorientation in both governmental and tourism industry strategies. Despite pre-pandemic concerns about market focus and the reliance on mass tourism rather than a more selective and higher-end tourist clientele, Laos, facing substantial post-pandemic revenue loss, continue to pursue in prioritising mass tourism and backpackers. Laos has also retained its concentration on nature-based ecotourism and its cultural assets.

The tendency both in Laos' government policy and planning documents and in reports and recommendations from international aid organisations and funding bodies and NGOs is to encourage sustainable tourism; the support of communities through pro-poor and community-based tourism; the provision of contingency funds for tourism businesses and workers, including appropriate and enforceable labour laws and protection; the greater use of digital platforms and tools to increase market intelligence, promotion and coordination; training and upgrading skills to produce a more educated and flexible workforce. These pronouncements seem more to do with playing to funders, support agents, human rights bodies and those concerned with climate change rather than a realistic appraisal of what is feasible and capable of implementation. When a country such as Laos, in desperate pursuit of tourist dollars, sets its mind on increasing its foreign exchange revenue, then the noble visions of sustainability and the protection of the environment and support of local residents and workers in a pro-poor agenda seem rather distant, nevertheless admirable goals. Yet, there is still room for optimism in the tourism industry in Lao PDR and its ability to rescue itself from what was the devastating impact of COVID-19.

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