Strategic Tourism Planning for Flagship Destinations in Lao PDR: Case Study of the Viengxay Caves

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Presentation outline

- Policy of Laos on Tourism Development
- Profile of Lao Tourism
- Flagship Attraction Planning: Case Study of the Viengxay Caves
Policy of Lao Government on Tourism Development

- The Government of Lao PDR has placed tourism as 1 of 11 priority sectors to contribute to country’s socio-economic development;

- Tourism is now a major contributor to national income (7% - 9% of GDP) and employment;

- Focus on the development of sustainable tourism based on culture, natural and historical resources;

- To implement an open-door policy concerning cooperation with foreign nations in economic and cultural matters;
Policy of Lao Government on Tourism Development (contd.)

- To promote tourism development that alleviates poverty and stimulates local production;
- To create employment opportunities;
- To generate and distribute income to the multi-ethnic Lao People;
- To promote and conserve the arts, culture and fine traditions of the Lao People; and
- Conserve and protect ancient archaeo-logical sites, the natural environment and historic monument.
Tourism development situation

- The infrastructure has been upgrade, the road network from north to south and east to west are now conveniently linking the Lao PDR to neighboring country.
Tourism development situation

- 4 International Airports (Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse)
- National Road 13, (north-south), No.8, No.9, No.7, No.12 (east-west)
Tourist Arrivals

Year | Tourist Arrivals
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2000 | 737,208
2001 | 673,823
2002 | 736,662
2003 | 636,361
2004 | 894,806
2005 | 1,095,315
2006 | 1,215,106
2007 | 1,623,943
2008 | 1,736,787
2009 | 2,008,363
2010 | 2,513,028
2011 | 2,723,564
In the 1960s Laos was caught up in the Second Indochina War (Vietnam War).

For nine years, from 1964 to 1973, more than 20,000 people lived in a 'hidden city' they built inside the limestone peaks to try to survive daily aircraft bombing by US forces.

Inside the caves they built everything they needed for their society to survive, including schools, hospitals, markets, a radio station and the headquarters of the Lao Patriotic Front (Pathet Lao).

The Viengxay Caves, a heritage site with national level protection, tells the story of this 'hidden city'
Vieng Xay Caves - Context

THE CONTEXT

1. Provincial Context
   - Houaphanh province is located in North – Eastern part of Lao PDR and Sam Neua district is provincial
   - Capital – 31 km for from Viengxay town
     - Population (in 2005) was 279,461 persons with a total of 27 different ethnic groups.
     - Despite relatively low tourist visitation Levels
Viengxay Caves - Location
Houaphanh market situation: Emerging destination

Visitors to Houaphanh province

Average annual growth rate for period 2004-2011: 71%
Vieng Xay Caves - Context

- The province offers a range of attractions:
  + Hintang archaeological park
  + Viengthong hot springs
  + Saleui waterfall
  + Nam Et – Phou louey national protected area
  + Viengxay caves or the “Hidden City “
  + Houaphanh province is identified as the birthplace of the Lao PDR
Viengxay: flagship attraction on the Northern Heritage Route

To Luang Namtha and Thailand

To Vang Vieng, Vientiane and Thailand

To To Hanoi

To To Dien Bien Phou, Vietnam

To To Nan

Key developed attraction on the Northern Heritage Route

Emerging attraction on the Northern Heritage Route

Northern Heritage Route

Access to/from Northern Heritage Route
2. District Context

– The town of Viengxay is located within the district of Viengxay

– The journey from Sam Neua to Vieng xay passes through particularly scenic countryside

– Viengxay town is located close to the Lao – Vietnam border along the road N:6

– Viengxay’s surrounds consists mainly of farmland interspersed with small villages.
3. The Environment
Viengxay is very significant for its cultural, historical and environmental values.

+ Historical National heritage sites
+ Natural landscape feature

– The Cave Sites and individual Buildings
  + Politburo members’ caves
  + Pathet Lao military headquarters complex
  + Additional VIP’s caves
  + Public service caves

– Landscape features
  + The natural amphitheater of mountains encircling the valley
4. Access and Infrastructure

- Viengxay is well serviced with “hard” and “soft” infrastructure.
- National Highway N:6 connects Viengxay to Sam Neua and continue to Lao-Vietnam border.
- The quality of the infrastructure is generally poor and in need of upgrading.
- Viengxay is well serviced with clean water, electricity schools, hospitals, community, libraries, sporting etc.
Viengxay Caves in the past
Viengxay Caves in the past
Viengxay Caves in the past
Viengxay Caves in the past

BBC World News: The Viengxay Caves (3 min video)
Key planning and implementation steps so far

- Preparation of a **Provincial Tourism Development Strategy**, identifying the Viengxay Caves as a **Flagship Attraction**
- Designation of Viengxay as a **National Historic Heritage Site**
- **Preparation of a Heritage Interpretation Plan** (with support from UNWTO, Deakin University and SNV)
- Development and official adoption of a **Viengxay Town Master Plan**, which emphasizes the site’s preservation and sustainable development (with support from UNWTO, Deakin University and Hansen Partnership, Melbourne)
- Improvement of **site interpretation, presentation and conservation of the historic objects** (with ongoing support from Deakin University (Melbourne)’s
- Introduction of an **Audio Tour** ensuring high quality interpretation for visitors
- **Expanding the tourism offer: Opening new caves for visitors** (with assistance from the ADB-funded tourism project) and new activities (with support from SNV and ADB projects) (such as a new trekking tour)
Quick overview of process

- Master Plan developed to guide the town’s development up to 2026
- Participatory process including a multitude of stakeholders
- Preservation of heritage and other tourism assets is included
Master Plan Process

Approval Process
- Project initiation
  - Agree on work program with government
  - Plan activities
  - Notify participants

Work Process
- Stage 1: Understanding the Place and Issues
  - Document Review
  - Fieldwork - survey and observe to fill in gaps.
  - SWOT analysis
    - Strengths - Weaknesses - Opportunities - Threats
    - Identify key issues

  Evolve vision for Viengxay

- Stage 2: Future Directions
  Determine future directions
  - Incorporate issues identified by the community.
  - Map ideas
  - Identify development and conservation principles that will drive the Master Plan
  - Map the principles.

  Evolve Principles and elements of the Master Plan

- Stage 3: Functional Elements and Precincts
  Develop elements of the plan
  - Illustrate objectives of the Master Plan by breaking it into elements or precincts
  - Develop diagrams to represent these elements
  - Assign a set of actions, design guidelines and priorities for the implementation of each element

- Stage 4: Implementation
  - Identify how the Master Plan will create positive change and by whom

Consultation
- Workshop One:
  - Community representatives
- Workshop Two:
  - Provincial and District Government Agencies
  - Landowners
  - Developers/business owners

Share Knowledge with Heritage experts
- Understand heritage significance of main sites
- Discuss draft principles
- Decide on how to demonstrate principles

Finalise the draft Master Plan
- Present draft to District and Provincial Government.
- Consider any comments.
- Agree on implementation
- Council review

Draft Master Plan

Present to Viengxay Conservation Committee
6 December 2006

Figure 1: Master Plan Methodology
Viengxay Town Master Plan
Quick overview of process

KEY ISSUES

1. Key stakeholder consultation
   - Workshop with members of the Viengxay community
   - Exchange the ideas for the future development and growth of the town
   - There are 4 main questions for discussion
     1. What are the characteristics of the town of Viengxay that you like or value?
     2. What are the characteristics you do not like about the town of Viengxay?
3. What are the activities or land uses which are missing in the of Viengxay at the moment?

4. If the cultural heritage of the town attracts more tourists, where should these uses be located within the town?
FUTURE DIRECTION

1. The vision for Viengxay; 2006 – 2026
   – “Viengxay is a town of Historical national heritage”
   – “Viengxay is a natural national heritage”

2. From this vision, the following five key themes or elements
   - Viengxay is a national heritage town
   - Viengxay is a prosperous town
     - Viengxay is a healthy town
     - Viengxay is a walking town
     - Viengxay is a green town
Viengxay Town Master Plan
Quick overview of process

IMPLEMENTATION

- Implementation strategy which priorities key actions
- Design Guidelines accompanying the master plan
- Promoting the master plan and public awareness program
- Training local officials on the objective and requirement of the master plan
Viengxay Town Master Plan
Quick overview of process

REVIEW AND MONITORING
- Establishment of review and monitoring processes
- Management and monitoring Toolkit
- Establishment of a good data base
- Regular reviewing of the master Plan
- Five year Reviews of the master Plan
Viengxay Today
Viengxay Caves Audio Tour

KEY
1 Viengxay Caves Visitor Centre
2 Audio stop
3 Other cave site
4 Bus station and market
5 Monument
6 District Administration Office
7 Limestone Karst
8 Pond
9 Road
10 Path

When you see signs like this, please enter the number in your player to hear the audio commentary.

President Kaysone Phomvihane’s Cave
A Politburo Dormitory
B Politburo Meeting Room
C Kaysone Phomvihane’s Office
D Kaysone Phomvihane’s Bedroom
E Other Bedrooms
F Emergency Room
G WC
H Kitchen
I Garage

When you see signs like this, please enter the number in your player to hear the audio commentary.
Lonely Planet 2010:

...[the audio tour] gives masses of first-hand background information and historical context offering a moving, balanced and uniquely fascinating glimpse of how people struggled on through the war years.

Compared to anything else you're likely to encounter in Laos, the sheer professionalism is mind-boggling.

It incorporates original interviews from local survivors and is enlivened with sound effects and accompanying music - the Hendrix-esque soundtrack to the Air America piece is particularly memorable.
Viengxay Caves and the guide books

Lonely Planet guide book

Top 10 underground experiences

Number 5: Pathet Lao Caves, Laos

Laos’ Top 10 Attractions:

Number 3: Viengxay Caves
Viengxay Caves and the guide books

Lonely Planet guidebook

Top 10 underground experiences:

Number 5: Pathet Lao Caves, Laos

Laos’ Top 10 Attractions:

Number 3: Viengxay Caves

Stefan Loose’s German language guidebook

Over 5 pages dedicated to the Viengxay Caves
Media attention and coverage of Viengxay

- BBC, 2007: Laos opens Vietnam War caves, website article
- BBC World News item (the video shown earlier on in the presentation)
- DEU, 2008: Die Höhlen von Vieng Xai (The Viengxay Caves) 43 min. Documentary film
- New documentary film being scripted: unique angle, where the story is told through the eyes of a nine year old girl when the bombing started
Future steps

Enhance access
- New airport:
  - A feasibility study for a new provincial airport has been conducted in response to an increased demand for air services and the limited operation capacity of the existing airport.
  - Conclusion of the study is that a new airport is feasible
  - Realization of the airport is currently being explored with various stakeholders and partners
- Road upgrades:
  - Roads are progressively being upgraded, but this remains a job that will extend into the future

Enhance marketing
- Linking site with other sites appealing to same market segment interested in the Caves to create multi-site tourist itineraries (such as the Northern Heritage Route) but also linking Indochina War sites (Dien Bien Phou, Viengxay, Long Chen etc.) for niche special interest markets.
Future steps

Enhance monitoring
- Improve monitoring capacity
- Involve various stakeholders in the monitoring
- Develop indicators that can be used to monitor the implementation of the various strategy and plans in an integrated way, ensuring they are working in harmony
- Ensuring funding for monitoring (e.g. by partnering with private sector in the monitoring exercise)
  ➔ a case for a Destination Management Organization at district level, including public and private sector stakeholders

Destination Management Organization
- Management responsibility of different resources (caves, access infrastructure etc.) with various departments, creating a rather chaotic situation
- Establishment of a DMO is a possible way to try to overcome this.
Thank you

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