



PLANNING the SAM SAY ORGANIC FARM in LAOS

By Bob Culbert of Builders Without Borders

Builders Without Borders is a Vancouver-based nonprofit organization. It is normally involved in post-disaster reconstruction including earthquakes in India, Algeria and Pakistan and the Tsunami in Asia. In August, an intriguing new opportunity arose – the development of a new farm and village in southern Laos which would combine organic coffee production, sustainable development, new construction methods and training for local farmers and families.

Early in October, Neil Griggs and I, both with Point Roberts connections, traveled to Laos to participate in the planning of the project. The 36 hour journey across fourteen time zones included flights via Taipei Taiwan, Bangkok and Ubon Ratchathani Thailand followed by a road trip over the border to Pakse, a prosperous city of 100,000 on the mighty Mekong River in southern Laos.

Laos is one of East Asia's poorest countries. Communist forces overthrew the monarchy in 1975, heralding years of isolation. Laos began opening up to the world in the 1990s, but remains dependent on international donations. This landlocked country has a population of 6.5 million in an area of 237,000 square kilometers (about the size of Utah) surrounded by Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), and China. The Mekong, which forms its western boundary south of the capital of Vientiane, is an important factor in the country's economy and geography.



The 167 hectare (400 acre) Sam Say Organic farm is located in 80 kilometers (50 miles) east of Pakse. The farm will be both a commercial organic coffee plantation and a learning centre for five hundred local people. They will live in a new village on the property for two years to learn modern farming techniques, environmental sustainability, and wood-frame house construction using lumber produced from the local forests.

Each day in Pakse began at dawn with a stroll along the Mekong followed by feeding of alms to a procession of Buddhist monks outside the Pakse Hotel (www.hotelpakse.com). After breakfast, highlighted by delicious French bread, we made the two hour trip to the property, traveling on ever more rural roads almost half way across the country. We spent the better part of a week preparing a base map of the land, forests, existing cultivation, and bordering streams. Each night, tired and sometimes soaked by tropical storms, we returned to the Pakse for excellent Lao and Thai food quenched with Beer Lao.

Construction of roads, village and crop planting will begin in a few weeks after the site dries following recent storms from the South China Sea.. On October 9th a herd of 15 goats arrived from Thailand, taking up residence in a new stable and pasture. The goats will produce milk for the people and manure for the fields.

Before leaving, Neil and I traveled south on the Mekong to Vat Phou, an ancient Kymer temple, and the Four Thousand Islands area of the river near the Cambodian border. We shared this enlightening experience with Freeman Chan, a Canadian architect now based in Hong Kong, and Andrea Chynoweth, a recent architect McGill University architecture graduate.

Two days later we bid adieu to Andrea who will remain in Pakse to continue the work in which Neil, Freeman and I will participate thanks to the latest electronic miracles and computer programs. The return trip fortunately included an overnight break in Bangkok and a strong tailwind across the Pacific Ocean.

Builders Without Borders information and opportunities are described on the website: www.builderswithoutborders.com.



Bob Culbert, Andrea Chynoweth and Neil Griggs surveying on the Sam Say farm.