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Capital Stays Relaxed

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Laos' Revolution Nudges Onward At Casual Pace

By Neil Kelly
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VIENTIANE—The Lao-tian capital's 135,000 residents and hundreds of foreign visitors are watching the "liberation" of the city—the takeover by the Pathet Lao, the Communist victors in the cruel 12-year civil war that nearly destroyed this country.

With some minor exceptions, the "liberation" is a peaceful process. The social revolution the Pathet Lao have promised is, so far, very nearly bloodless.

This, and the nature of the city itself, make Vientiane an extraordinary place. It has always been a refuge for Europeans and Asians alike, and so it is now. Like the Lao people, Vientiane is friendly and gentle. The tempo of life is not hurried. The most aggressive American news agency men find themselves happily slowing down here.

Vientiane for a long time has been kind to travelers and hospitable to refugees. Many of the foreign residents were left here by earlier waves of the war. A Frenchman who owns a garage and car rental firm fought with the French army before its war in Vietnam ended in defeat in 1954. All he possesses in the world is here. A young Australian teacher, after five years in Laos, says he is prepared to go to any lengths to stay on.

Shops still have imported cigarettes and cigars, scotch and brandy, but stocks are running down and such products are not likely to be seen here again.

tracted by the lifestyle, the cheapness of living, the beautiful girls and the marijuana.

The first places the Pathet Lao "liberated" were the bars and "nightclubs." The White Rose and Lulu's, two of the best-known houses of pleasure in the Orient, have entertained their last customers.

Yet the opium dens are still open in Vientiane, and marijuana and opium are openly on sale in the town market. The new regime is not expected to interfere with these traditional pleasures.

The Communists have so far used their power sparingly except in their treatment of the Americans.

All that remains of the American presence is a skeleton staff at the U.S. embassy—22 men, six of whom are Marine guards. The Pathet Lao say they want U.S. aid to continue but without strings.

Certainly, Laos needs friends and all the aid it can get. The country is bankrupt. Only a five-nation foreign exchange fund, which provides \$32 million a year, enables it to buy essential goods abroad. Half the money comes from the Americans.

Laos' exports are negligible and will remain so until the tremendous destruction of war can be repaired. At least one-third of the country's 3.2 million people lost their homes in the war.

Royal Air Lao will soon cease operations unless new parts can be imported for its aging American and French airliners. Gasoline reserves are drying up, and officials, expecting the disappearance of cars, are planning to import bicycles from China in exchange for timber and tin.

Laos social revolution and the drastic changes it will bring do not appeal to its people. At least 20,000 of them have fled across the Mekong to Thailand in the past few months. Pathet Lao boats patrol the river, and some nights you can hear gunfire.

"Smugglers from Thailand," is the official explanation next morning. Western diplomats, however, say hundreds of would-be escapees have been killed trying to cross the Mekong in recent weeks.

Vientiane's only international hotel, the Lane Xang, houses permanent delegations and visitors from Moscow and Peking. The Chinese normally occupy a rectangular table on one side of the restaurant, and the Russians sit at a round table on the other. They get no closer than that.

Foreign influences are frowned upon by the zealous young Pathet Lao soldiers. However, even they stray. I saw a group of them in a Chinese restaurant, drinking a good deal of "decadent" whiskey from Scotland. They left without paying.

The manager made excuses for them, explaining that they had in fact been paid for by a group of Soviet helicopter pilots dining upstairs.

The Pathet Lao look with some amazement on the hippies from the West, at-