Travel

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Don Khong island: a place for perfect rest

Welcoming Visit Laos Year 2018, Vientiane Times is publishing a series of feature articles and images inviting you to experience the authentic nature, culture, history and hospitality of Laos, Jewel of the Mekong.

Bounfaeng Phaymanivong

Few will argue against an opportunity to spend a few days in the countryside. It's often the perfect way to get away from the hustle and bustle and stresses of city life.

The traffic, endless competition and monotony of life in large towns often drives people crazy. Luckily, Laos still has many beautiful places where people can forget their worries, such as Khong district in Champassak province in the far south of Laos.

This wonderful part of Champassak is one of my favourite travel destinations because it is a place of unique beauty with numerous scenic attractions.

When one mentions Don Khong, a large island in Khong district, most Lao people will recognise it as the place that is home to the magnificent Khonphapheng and Li Phi waterfalls.

A day and night spent on Khong Island recently was sheer bliss, whiling away the hours in a restaurant with a soft drink, catching a glimpse of a large statue of Buddha bathed in sunlight across the Mekong River, and taking a ride in a longtail boat.

On the mighty river were dozens of fishermen with their traditional nets, catching some fish to be served up in the many local restaurants.

The boat ride reminded me that life around Khong Island is much slower and less complicated than my life in the city.

This sort of lifestyle is a rare experience in most parts of Laos because of the fast-paced development sweeping across the country. I felt I was lucky to be able to explore the old lifestyle of Khong Island before the inevitable arrival of change.

Accommodation

There are many choices when it comes to accommodation, depending on room rates at guesthouses and hotels and their location on Don Det, Don Khon or Khong islands.

For example, a traveller with a limited budget can choose to stay in a reasonably priced guesthouse or share a room with friends to save money and to stay for a few more days and nights.

My recent stay at a hotel in town cost me 150,000 kip per night. It was a bit costly but the facilities were good.

Of course, visitors can choose from a range of cheaper guesthouses in the little town. Having more than two travel mates will also allow you to avoid spending too much on accommodation.

Food

It's not too difficult to find restaurants to serve you breakfast, lunch or dinner. But keep in mind that it's not easy to find a place that stays open late, so you need to go out for dinner as early as possible.

A wide array of food is on offer at restaurants that cater to tourists but the prices will be a bit higher than at other places.

People can choose and ask about the prices before ordering, and this is a good way to avoid problems.

Many of the dishes involve some form of fish because the Mekong River is a breeding site for many different varieties, especially in the 4000 Islands (Si Phan Don) area. Restaurants offer fish salad, fish soup and grilled fish.

A giant statue of Buddha perched on a hilltop near Khong Island.

Leisure activities

If one wishes to opt for leisure activities other than cycling around Khong Island in the cool of the morning, a ride in a longtail boat is one of the most interesting activities for tourists.

Bookings for boat trips can be made at some guesthouses in the town centre. A ride takes at least two hours, leaving from Khong Island and going down to Don Det and Don Khon.

This gives visitors a close-up view of everyday life, including the fishermen on the river and farmers selling their vegetables by the riverside in the early evening.

Visitors can also enjoy taking pictures of the enchanting landscape, the islands and their greenery, and the clean environment.

Besides birds, one can also watch buffalo swimming from one island to another in search of food. Many of them dive into the deep and strong current to get at the green riverweed, their favourite food during the dry season.

Nature lovers will enjoy breathing in the fresh air while sitting on a boats and watching what the island residents are up to.

A fisherman casts his net into the placid waters of the Mekong.

How to get there

Taking a public bus from the Southern Bus Terminal in Vientiane and travelling along Road No. 13 South is the easiest and cheapest way to get to Khong Island. The overnight journey costs only 150,000 kip and one will arrive at Khong Island in the morning.

So, don't skip your own homeland for an overseas holiday - go and discover the delights of Khong Island. Once you have visited it, you will keep encouraging others to do the same.

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