

MARCH 2010

Mekong Circle "Return To Laos" Tour Organizer Dies

Anoma Sengchandavong died February 6, 2010 in Vientiane, Laos at the age of 34.



Who was Anoma whose voice I first heard over the phone in New York City sometime in December 2007? Sambaidee, I said, you were highly recommended by a close Lao friend who can help me organize a tour in Laos for a group of Filipinos residing in the USA. Oh yes, the soft disembodied voice replied from Vientiane, I have been told about your group from my elderly relatives who mentioned your hospital here where many of you used to work.

His English was good and I was encouraged. My research for a reputable, dependable tour agency turned up close to 20 Vientiane-based companies. I had no clue whom to pick. Their pretty websites were no basis. My queries via email returned mangled English responses and those I promptly scratched off from the list. If I had to lead some 30 to 50 people to trust a tour agent with their Social Security money and aging health, intelligible communications was vital.

And so Anoma and I embarked on a cross- Pacific Ocean exchange that stretched over 10 months via email and phone calls. His calling card said he was the Reservation Supervisor for Indocruise Ltd., a company not even on my list. (I learned later that Indocruise is one of a few companies specializing in river cruises on the Mekong, and not land tours. The boats are very long, narrow barges, with three to four cabins, that sail between Houie Say and Luang Prabang. Cabins are exquisitely outfitted; water-side dining areas glisten with mahogany colors; customers live aboard for days. Needless to say, rates were too overboard for Mekong Circle fixed income members.)

Anoma understood that our group was not his usual moneyed European cruise clientele. He scaled down the rates for our tour. He was patient with my most

mundane and insistent queries (What's the menu at the Tam Nak Lao Restaurant for our November 13 lunch? How long is the bus trip from the Dokmaideng Hotel to the Buddha Park ? Will the Talat Sao Market Mall accept credit cards?) With seven years experience in the tour business, and now dealing with someone who knew next to nothing about organizing a tour, he exhibited a laid-back temperament that I should have known is a distinctive trait of the Lao.

As our departure date loomed closer and with still too many loose threads hanging and trepidation knocking, I decided electronic communication was inadequate. It was best to be on the ground with Anoma. My wife Pet and I flew to Vientiane from New York in August 2008. For six days we scouted the itinerary that Anoma had laid out for our five-day tour in November. It included side trips to Luang Prabang, a three-hour (roundtrip on the Mekong to the Pak Ou Caves, visits to two villages specializing in Lao-lao whiskey and textile weaving. It was during that period that the disembodied voice and the digital email messages assumed substance. For one thing, he looked 18 not 30, fair-skinned and willowy. For another, he also spoke French. And had a college degree. And was as skinny as I am.

By the time we left, we gained a warm friend. I left unsaid the panicky times I suffered when my messages were left unanswered for too long, prompting some unkind admonitions on my part. A Barong Tagalog I gave him should soothe any bruised feelings. He was overwhelmed with the gift, surely something he will not find at the Talat Sao or anyplace else. At the outdoor welcome reception garden party in front of the Philippine Embassy, he wore it proudly - only one of two Lao males in the Philippine attire out of about 80 guests.

The day I departed Vientiane November 16, 2008, the last one to leave among the 27 members in the group, he drove me to the airport. Kop chai, kop chai I said for all his help and told him how much our group savored beyond words an experience they will treasure.

Please give this scarf to your wife, he said, packaged in an elegant box. I hope she likes it. She can wear it with a long evening black dress to show off the weave design. Please send me some pictures.

For some reason that I now deeply regret I was not able to.