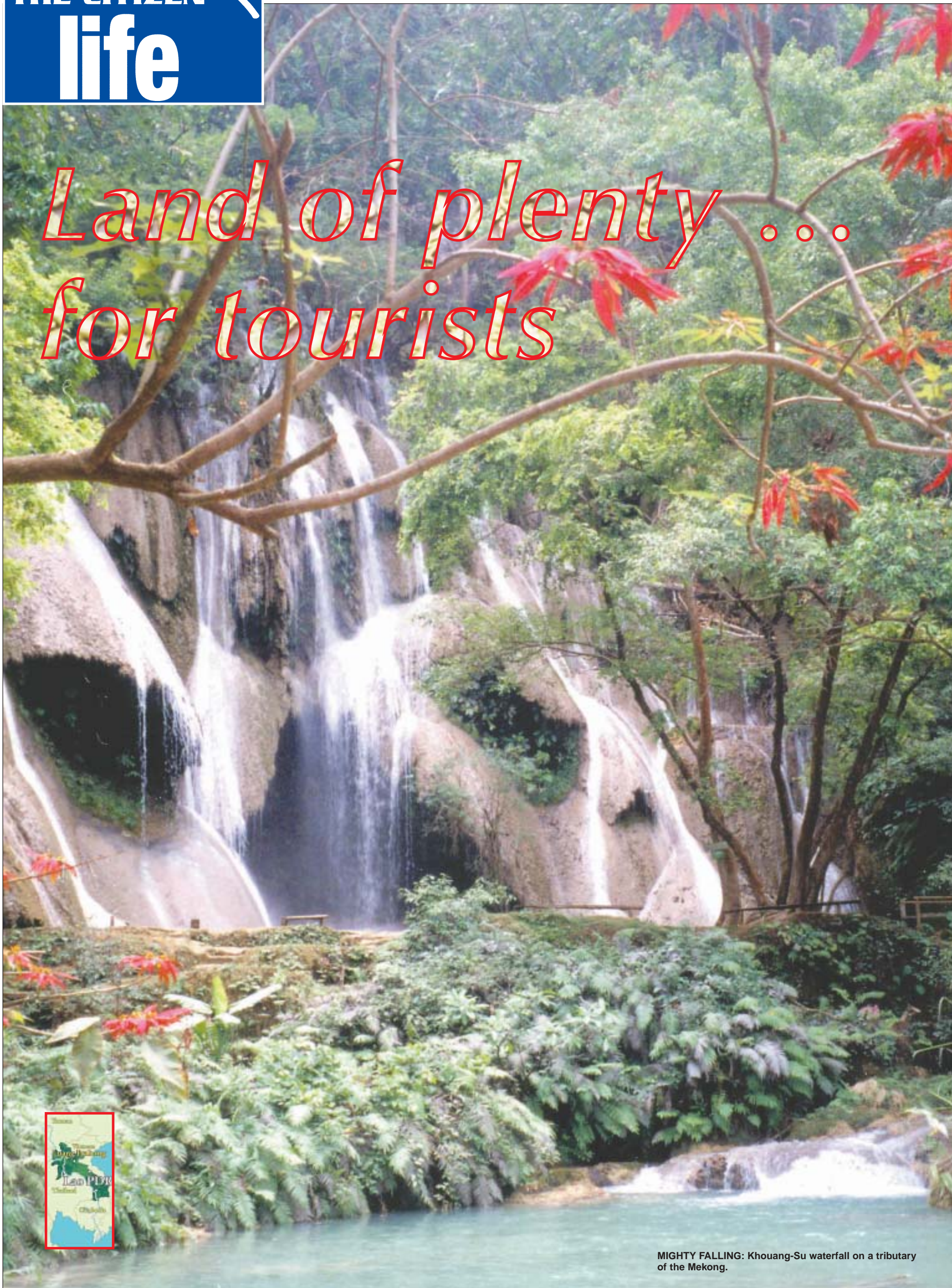


THE CITIZEN
life

*Land of plenty ...
for tourists*



MIGHTY FALLING: Khouang-Su waterfall on a tributary of the Mekong.

LIFE

by Heather Campbell Hapeta

“Pst! Change money? Opium? Marijuana?” Women mutter the offer from behind hands as I walk into the market. The black-market thrives in Laos and, here in Luang Prabang, a World Heritage site, I succumb to temptation.

“How much?” I ask, and, with that sign of encouragement, I’m whisked into the walkways of the market and negotiations begin.

“Eighteen,” says the younger one.

Aware that laughter is a good lubricant in Asia I laugh.

“Twenty,” I respond, knowing it’s what a guy paid only 10 minutes earlier.

“Nineteen,” she tries again.

“Twenty!” Conceding, to the fair price for us both, she hands me a number of rubber-band held bundles, each containing 10,000 kip.

My first illegal transaction is complete.

It’s hard to believe that such huge bundles, casually dropped into my bag, were worth so little; all those zeros drove my head crazy.

I’m a kip millionaire and yet the money leaks out of my daypack – 3500 kip to replace a small towel, 15,000 for a basic room, 14,000 for an Indian meal.

Spending another 4000 I get to walk up a gigantic rock hill, Phousi.

In the heat I walk slowly up the steps, between an avenue of trees, to the old Wat Cham Si and a fantastic 360 degree view.

The Mekong River, Luang Prabang and the surrounding mountains are laid out before me in shades of grey, orange, green, blue and gold.

Early next morning, I go for breakfast in a noodle shop, a place where tuk-tuk drivers and other workers, eat. Eggs, a baguette, strong local coffee and a glass of tea are put in front of me. The tea seems weird but everyone has the same combination so I assume it’s the custom.

As I eat, a line of orange-clad monks file by, stopping for alms. Women, who had moments

earlier served my meal, kneel for a blessing after putting a small packet of food in each begging-bowl. On the side of one tuk-tuk is a sign, You have tried the rest now experience the best and so I arrange for him to take me, and two friends out to the weaving village and other sights.

Despite the unseasonable rain, we go the few miles to Ban Phanom, a village that has royal patronage that enables the women to make income from their looms. At the door to their homes, women, of all ages, sit creating wonderful geometric designs in cotton and silk. I buy a dark blue shoulder bag then watch as the seller continues weaving. It seems too complicated for me, but even young girls are working alongside their mothers and grandmothers.

Young boys seem more interested in catching winged termites, which, triggered by the rain, have emerged from the ground, flying upwards like a thick plume of black smoke – a high-protein treat for dinner.

We continue our tuk-tuk tour, singing along with the tape and driver “... it was an itzy bitsy teeny weenie yellow polka dot bikini.” The waterfall and surrounds, although beautiful, didn’t seem a good enough excuse to move the hill-tribe of Mien people so tourists could enjoy the falls as part of a national park.

We go to their relocated village. Despite compensation they do not seem content. Their sad eyes, betel-nut stained teeth and untended village indicated to me they did not like being on flat ground, with no stream, instead of beside the waterfall surrounded by lush bush. It is difficult being a tourist when I see what is done in the name of tourist needs.

Souvenirs from this area include tiny opium scales, carved pipes and embroidered squares of material depicting village life. A variety of accommodation is available.

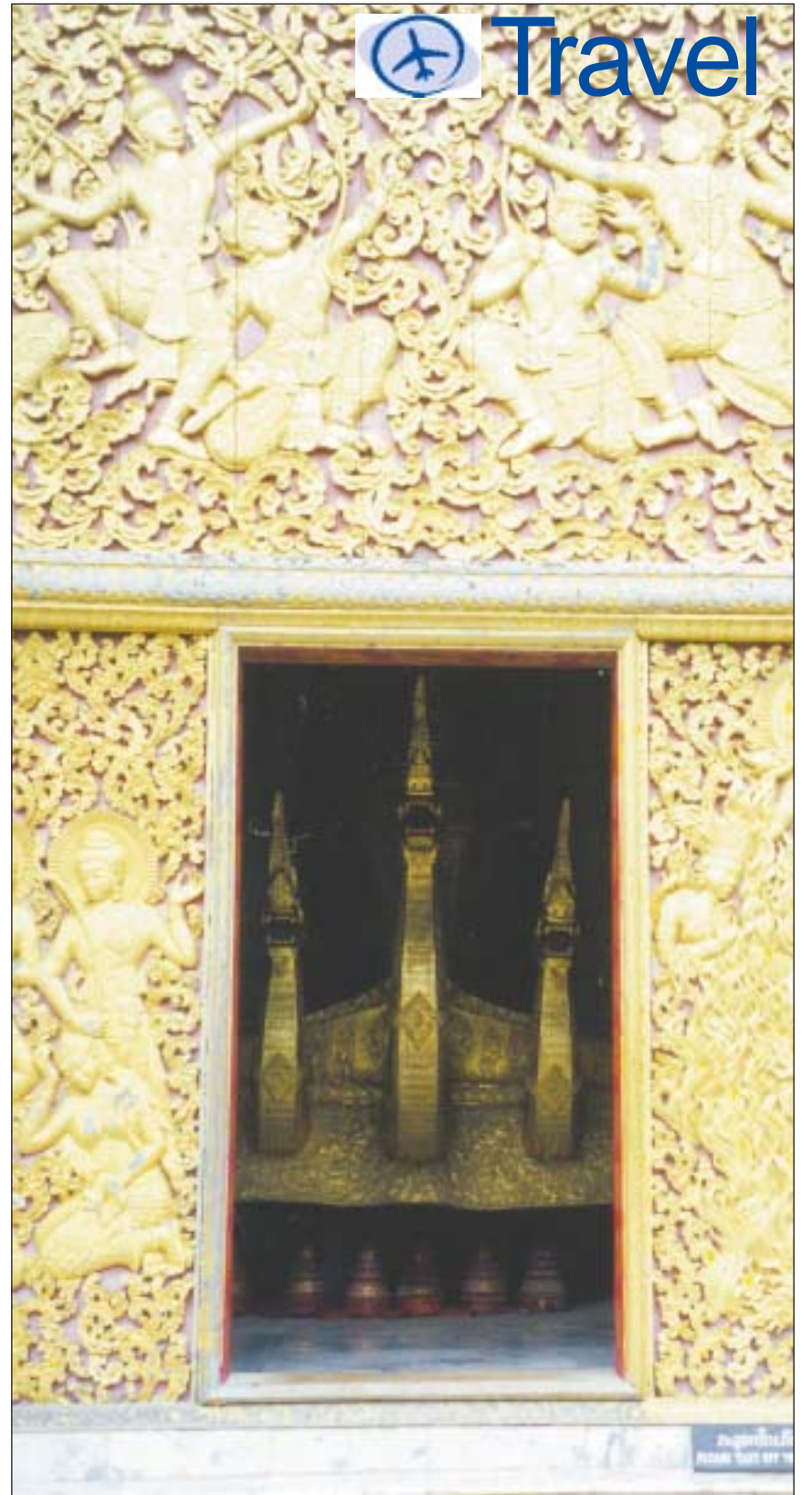
Fly to Luang Prabang from Vientiane or travel by bus. Accommodation is varied but plentiful.



ANCIENT ART: A woman weaves at her doorway in Ban Phanom, a 300-year-old weaving village.



BRIGHT IDEAS: In Luang Prabang there are plenty of colourful gifts to buy.



INTRICATE WORK: Entrance to a building in Wat Xieng Thong, built in 1559.



FOR WORSHIP: Wat (temple) Xieng Thong in Luang Prabang has been well cared for over the years. Luang Prabang is the old capital city of Laos.