

# On the Coffee Trail

An emerging specialty coffee scene in Laos has attracted a growing number of espresso geeks and independent travelers to the lush Bolaven Plateau—best seen on two wheels.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG SAUERS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Excelsa coffee cherries at Ban Kok Phung Tai; an elephant gets a bath at Tad Lo Lodge; separating the dried beans at a plantation in Paksong.



## I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

what I was getting myself into when I arranged to meet a man named “Koffie.” Yes, Koffie—as in coffee, café, *gafae*. By the time the Laos-based coffee connoisseur serves me a fifth cup of what I’m pretty sure is the best espresso I’ve ever had, I feel as if I might start levitating.

Dutch expat Koffie—real name: Cornelis Obee—has spent the past 11 years in Paksong, the largest town in the Bolaven

Plateau where 95 percent of Laos’s coffee is grown. Working as a guide and occasional barista at his rustic coffee shop, Won Coffee, Koffie leads “cherry to cup” tours of local plantations every morning; in the afternoon, he hosts workshops for those with a deeper interest in the coffee-making process. I’m signed up for both.

I’ve rented a motorbike with plans to tour the chip-sealed roads that circle the Bolaven Plateau

in search of the country's best coffee. The route has become popular among independent travelers, who hire their wheels in Pakse, the capital of southern Champasak province, to access the plateau's abundant natural attractions—the waterfalls are spectacular—and meet the Mon-Khmer ethnic groups in the area. I'm in the growing minority of travelers following the espresso trail, hoping my motorbike will give me access to remote farms and local cafés.

After I've driven two hours from Pakse to Paksong, dodging potholes, cows and the occasional goat along the way, Koffie's cram session proves to be an excellent primer. "I'll overload you with knowledge," Koffie warns me. "You might forget half of what I've told you by nightfall." He explains why Paksong is ideal for

growing coffee: the cool average temperature of 24 degrees combined with the high altitude—the plateau is at 1,300 meters—and 3,700 millimeters of rainfall per year. Koffie describes how local farmers use a process

called washing to produce a better balance of bitterness and acidity.

But it's the plateau's volcanic soil that really makes the region so ideal for the bean. It's home to 30 different types of arabica—the higher-valued bean variety—yielding around 3,000 distinct tastes. It had never occurred to me that parts of Laos could have the same climate and topography that feed coffee plants in places like Ethiopia and Sumatra.

"Before, you only tasted coffee," Koffie tells me. "Now you will know what you're drinking."

French colonists cultivated the first arabica, robusta and liberica coffee plants in Laos, bringing them in the 1900s from their farms in Vietnam. But the crops suffered from frost, as well as an outbreak of fungus called leaf rust, and were almost wiped out from a series of

wars. During World War II, many French farmers fled Laos; then civil war rampaged through the country; finally, during the American conflict in Vietnam in the 1960s, the U.S. carpet-bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and its surrounds brought death, destruction and disorder to villages and farms in the Bolaven Plateau.

Coffee came back on the scene in 1994, when French-educated Sinouk Sisombat bought farmland on the plateau, hoping to revive arabica in his home country. Others followed Sinouk's lead, and before long arabica was on the rise and a "quality over quantity" approach took root. While Laos only exports about 25,000 tonnes of beans per year—by comparison, Vietnam exported 1.4 million tonnes in 2017—producers like Sinouk and the Bolaven Plateau Coffee Producers



FROM TOP: Snap-happy in the lush valley of Tad Yuang Waterfall; following locals on two wheels.



## / the quest /

Cooperative have worked with farmers to improve quality and focus on putting high-earning beans on the market.

“The Bolaven Plateau is a small pond with many different fish,” Koffie says, grabbing some green coffee beans and lighting the burner beneath his wok, which he uses to teach people like me how to roast beans at home. As he tosses beans onto the hot wok, he adds, “Everyone does coffee their own way,

and they’re all proud of their products.”

Leaving Koffie sufficiently caffeinated, I backtrack on my motorbike to Sabaidee Valley, my retreat for the night. The hilltop resort occupies a prime position on the edge of the plateau, overlooking a basin that fills with mist in the morning. The hotel’s café is buzzing, and I pick up a souvenir of fair-trade Paksong beans to take home. The next morning,



I drive 100 kilometers to Tad Lo village, a common stopover known for its stunning waterfalls, Tad Lo and Tad Hang, taking a coffee break at Sinouk’s resort and coffee plantation. In Tad Lo, life moves at the pace of a weekend picnic. After zipping around on a Honda for two days, I’m content to soak up the cool air and unwind by the waterfalls.

Tad Lo isn’t just a rest stop, though. For many, it’s a base for visiting ethnic minority communities, specifically the Katu, one of 14 Mon-Khmer groups in the area. My last day on the plateau begins with a drive down a dirt road to

a Katu village called Ban Kok Phung Tai, where I join a tour of the coffee-farming community led by a local man named Hook (nicknamed “Captain Hook” by clever tourists). Eloquent and friendly, if enigmatic, he provides a lens into an animist lifestyle it’s hard to imagine existing these days. As it turns out, he is also a coffee savant.

Under the shade of a robusta plant, Hook describes how farmers in his village—some of the 10,000 coffee-farming families who live on the Bolaven Plateau—fertilize crops with the sun-dried skin of coffee cherries and



FROM TOP: A guest room at Le Jardin de Pakse; Tad Yuang Waterfall; bamboo filter coffee by Captain Hook. OPPOSITE: The villas at Sabaidee Valley resort hover over the clouds.

**“Before you only tasted coffee;  
now you will know what you’re drinking.”  
—bean-to-brew expert Koffie Obee**

the water left over from fermentation. He picks cherries from a branch to demonstrate stages of ripeness. Over cups of robusta brewed in bamboo filters, we also discuss Katu life: animal sacrifice, shamanism and local beliefs. “In my village, we never speak of the future,” he says, citing an example. “Evil spirits will know your plans.”

My plans for the plateau are almost over, and on my last night I ride back to

Pakse to soak my saddle sores in the saltwater pool at Le Jardin de Pakse, a turmeric-colored villa that speaks to the city’s French colonial past. There, I start to feel sentimental for the pastoral world I just left and remember something Koffie said: “I try to give you adaptable knowledge you can use outside of here, coffee knowledge for the real world...as long as you can remember it.” Coming down from this caffeine high, there’s no way I could forget it. ☺



## THE DETAILS

### GETTING THERE

There are non-stop flights to Pakse from Vientiane, Siem Reap and Bangkok. From there, **Miss Noy Motorbike** (No. 13 S Road, Pakse; 856-20/2227-2278; from **US\$6 per day**) hires out some of the best bikes in town and offers nightly informational sessions on driving the loop. Not confident on two wheels? No problem. **Avis** ([avis.com](http://avis.com); from **US\$75 per day**) has a branch in Pakse, renting out cars and SUVs that can be dropped off in Vientiane as well as Pakse.

### STAY

**Le Jardin de Pakse** This charming hotel, located in a colonial villa near the Dao

Hueang Market in Pakse, is a great place to start or end a journey into the Bolaven Plateau. [lejardindepakse.com](http://lejardindepakse.com); **doubles from US\$60**.

### Sabaidee Valley

The best rooms at this spacious all-villa resort boast views of the mist-shrouded valley just outside of Paksong. [sabaideevalley.com](http://sabaideevalley.com); **villas from US\$51**.

### Tad Lo Lodge

Rustic bungalows look out over Tad Hang, the small, gentle waterfalls in the center of Tad Lo. Be aware that the lodge keeps two rescued elephants on site, with which they offer rides to guests. 856-34/211-889; **doubles from US\$50**.

### DO

#### Captain Hook's Coffee Tour

Katu village Ban Kok Phung Tai is on the border of Salavan and Sekong Provinces on the Tad Lo-Paksong Road. Note: If wooden beams are barricading the village entrance, a special ceremony is taking place and outsiders are strictly forbidden. [fb.com/hook.laos](http://fb.com/hook.laos); **tours from US\$3**.

#### Mr. Koffie's Coffee Tour & Workshop

Visit the humble, roadside Won Coffee café in Paksong at 10 a.m. to join Koffie's tour; his coffee-roasting workshops start at 2 p.m. [paksong.info](http://paksong.info); **tours from US\$6, workshops from US\$21**.