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**TrekShare – Crashing a Laos Wedding – Part 2**

**By Joseph Kultgen**

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Public Service Announcement: Drinking and driving is bad. With that said I've drank and drove a few times in my day and have puked in the back of cars while someone drunker than me was at the wheel. My question wasn't meant to be judgmental but rather compassionate. They were drunk; the streets were dark and littered in potholes. When all is said and done I know I would have jumped on the back of either of their scooters. I just needed assurance that we weren't going to take some drunken steroid infested crotch rocket ride reminiscent of high school. You've got to hate crap like that.

The next portion of our conversation seemed to flow like there was no language barrier at all. Ton explained that he was careful to make the necessary judgements to drive safely. This wasn't one of those times when someone drinking shouldn't drive. This was one of those times a person uses his judgement correctly. The idea of harming himself or another person was foreign to him. This appears to be the norm in a society built upon few enforceable laws but harsh penalties for living. His outlook was refreshingly unique. Most of us live in a world where we aren't trusted to make our own judgements. He has no choice.

I soon discovered upon exiting the gala that it had never been their intention to drive. The party was just down the street. The energy reached a fevered pitch as we rounded the corner and entered the rear of the bride's house. I walked stoically onto the back patio with my head held low. I do this for a variety of reasons. The primary reason I do

this is in my everyday life is because I find if I look up the craziest wacko will undoubtedly engage me in a conversation.

I did it in Laos as a sign of respect. Bowing is an integral aspect of the salutation and this way I was half way there. The depth at to which you bow and the duration all reflect your position in life relative to the person you are addressing. The corresponding hand positions are difficult if not impossible to master by anyone except for the natives so I don't suggest trying. Just keep your head low and don't look someone in the eyes unless you are given indication that it's appropriate to do so.

Two more reasons to keep your chin low. Let's just say that walking into a communist country like a goddamn red, white and blue peacock perpetuates certain stereotypes that affect our relationships with other countries. The second reason is simpler. People taller than the mean height of 5'3" will ultimately take a roof of the house to the noggin sometime during their stay in this vertically challenged land.

About 40 people were comfortably dispersed in 4 primary groups. One group was inside the house and used the back patio door to supply food, drink and a constant flow of new people to the party. One of the people in this group was Pond's wife who we unfortunately didn't get to meet. She was too busy working behind the scenes. I assume it's a traditional bonding time for the mother, bride and her girls.

The second group was dancing around a tree just brought out by a woman from inside the house. It was the Lamvong dance, except they were all circling the tree together. It was a small space so I can see why.

The third group was a table of primarily older men drinking and a rare 2 smokers. Not many people smoke in Laos and this was the first time I saw anyone smoking in such a public space. I greeted what to me looked like the oldest guy at the table. I would say he was about 48. This is old in a country with an average life expectancy is 54 years old. He was also one of the smokers. Yeah right.... Smoking kills. We grabbed two seats at the ends of the "old-guys" table and spurted out "kop chi li li" another 30 or so times.

A fourth group congregated along a makeshift bar situated behind us on the perimeter of the lawn and street. This is where the guys who brought us to the party set up camp.

Within about 6 seconds of sitting down a 1/3 full glass of BeerLao was between my eyes. I took a drink and watched my friend Paul try to explain that he would prefer soda water. It was basically a long–running joke at this point into our 5–day Laotian trek. I can't explain how foreign the concept of abstaining from drinking is to the Laotian people. Laotians don't have any concept of not drinking because of personal choices. Many people don't drink often because it doesn't bode well with their health, but this wasn't the case. Let's just say it wasn't the first time people would be brought into hysterics upon a toast from Paul's soda water. It only got funnier each of the 25 additional times he declined a drink.

Being able to consume and abuse almost anything at our discretion is not the situation in Laos. There isn't the same kind of access to external factors. Their gentle personalities and suspicious nature is a reflection of their

lack and oftentimes desire of material goods. This is ideologically different than western capitalism principals that are slowly being adopted since 1990. Not to mention the U.S. did conduct a secret war in 1973 that left it the most bombed country of the Vietnam War. I know you probably don't want a history lesson, but the rational was to cut off the northern trade routes of the Ho Chi Min Trail in order to curtail the spread of communism. There I said it.

A few short minutes later a sharply dressed Pond walked into the party. He wore a purplish blue iridescent silk oxford with the sleeves rolled up. Both his wrists were tightly wrapped in a white cloth rope - traditional Lao boxing style. He looked like a bad ass as he sat down between me and Paul. Pond quickly got offered a drink from one of the 4 people who were circling the table like vultures looking for sober victims. A variety of drinks were being served. Variety, however, is a relative word in Laos. No apple martinis or cosmos – just whiskey and beer.

Up until this point I had only drank Whiskey Lao and Tiger whiskey, which appear to be the two competing, brands. At 8000 kip (\$.80) per bottle I was happy to see the party upgraded to a bottle each of Johnny Walker Red and Black. One woman also carried around a pitcher of diluted whiskey and water. This is what you drank when you wanted to stop drinking. The great aspect of drinking in Laos is the one glass rule or in this case one glass and one–shot glass rule. This ensures that when you are given a drink you

pound it immediately. In general when drinking beer in Laos the person who buys the 40's–esque glass bottle pours a drink for himself before offering the glass to the surrounding people. This is brilliant for 2 main reasons. The beer stays cool and fewer dishes are made for our bride throwing the party.

Pond, myself and the rest of the people at the party continued to drink and speak in whatever means we possibly could. A lot of time was just spent laughing enjoying the collective moment we were sharing together. Paul excused himself after the party turned into an alternative version of the century club. One drink per minute for 100 minutes. It was probably during the 58th minute when the food came to the table. Traditional Lao drinking food. Rather than pretzels and buffalo wings the Lao people make extraordinary hot mango salads to entice drinking. I'd eaten a super hot mango salad in Thailand just days before so I was aware what I was in for. The dish was passed immediately to me and the elder at the table began aggressively coaxing me to take a bite. I grabbed the spoon and took a small bite hoping to overt their attention. This really didn't work. Now I was being ostracized for my lack of bite.

The elder took the large Chinese soup spoon and started burying it deep in the salad. His eyes and the 12 other leering pairs made it apparent I needed to bring my game to the table. I grabbed back the large spoon and made a single aggressive swoop into the salad. The spoonful of salad I pulled out was about as much as the spoon was designed to hold. Unfortunately it is nearly impossible to dump out any overabundance from the deep metal spoon because of their high vertical edges. Not much else to do but take the bite. I don't remember what happened for the next 3 minutes. I do remember about 3 minutes later feeling like my head was going to spontaneously combust and that I had probably not been breathing for the three minutes prior. Once my eyes rolled back around to the front of my head I noticed a very concerned elder offering me a shot of whiskey. This is only the second time in the evening I refused a drink. Instead I opted for an outstretched glass of BeerLao. After a quick shot of beer I lunged for the shot of whiskey and then a glass of diluted whiskey. It's a pretty amazing situation when a shot of whiskey is smoother than a hot mango salad. In retrospect I should have taken the shot first. These guys knew what they were doing.

I'm pretty sure Paul had returned by this point to witness my hiccuping frenzy caused by the ridiculously hot food. The guesthouse was locked and instead of waking up the owners twice he opted to come back to the party. What a considerate guy! The night progressed in this standard fashion for a while until Pond excused himself from the table. Much of the rest of the table cleared at this point and headed in separate directions.

Group #4 hanging out by the back bar was still in full stride. It was time for the friends and youngsters to take the reigns of the party. One of the 10 or so twenty year olds was strumming a guitar and a variety of other guys were intermittently interjecting lyrics. We weren't going to leave the party without listening to some tunes. After the first few songs the guitar was extended our way. Paul was always up for hacking out some obscure song that no one in Laos had ever heard of. To be honest unless you knew Betterman by Robbie Williams, a little N'sync or the "it's a hip – a hop – a hip" song they probably would have no clue. Paul broke out a funky upbeat song that got the crowd clapping – although at a very different beat than the song suggested. Next we broke out Creep and some of the guys joined us in singing the melancholy mumbling of Radiohead. It was probably the loudest we ever sang that song. Pretty soon DJ Jacky Joe was at the stereo plugging in burnt CD's from Malaysia and Thailand. Most of the music was completely unfamiliar to me, but there was a couple of compilation CD's that caught my eye. I recognized 2 songs. The Final Countdown by Europe was the first track and I hadn't passed this song by since 1985; so why start now? The

crowd seemed to like my selection based on the amount of air guitar I saw being played. Next up was a little "Beat It" by Michael Jackson. Unfortunately this was the worst karaoke version of "Beat It" I've ever heard. In retrospect the complete lack of knowledge of Michael Jackson has got to be a good thing for any society.

The party slowly unwound into a sparing match between a 4-foot tall Bruce Lee fanatic and myself. After a few tornado kicks, a mock punch to my nuts and a lot of posturing it was time to go.

This experience opened my eyes to a country that first started allowing Westerners to enter in 1989. Our knowledge and experiences are skewed by the boundaries and institutions we place ourselves. It was wonderful to escape to a place where those boundaries are outside any field I have ever walked.

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Joseph Kultgen is co-founder of [www.trekshare.com](http://www.trekshare.com) and has been writing the monthly newsletter – TrekNews – for the past 3 years. He is a contributor to STA Travel and Gap literature as well as a co-creator of TrekTV.

## **Crash Course on Wedding Crashing**

**By Hanif Khaki**

What you're about to read is a 'labor of love'.

Hours and hours of learning and research went into gaining this experience and compiling it in a form you can benefit from. This article was meant to be a useful, educational and instructive resource for anyone interested in this topic.

Enjoy it – and let us know what you think.

For most occasions, there are invitations. In every invitation, there is an invited guest. There-in lies the subject of our discussion. You see, for every party, there are bound to be party crashers.

A prime example is wedding celebrations. There are people who come to the event without an invitation and who in fact are not even invited. These are known as the wedding crashers.

Wedding crashers are "unexpected guests" mainly because they were not invited to the event. These crashers are drawn to these occasions like moths to a flame.

So, for anyone who wishes to know how to become a wedding crasher, here are some tips that you can use.

1. Try to be a long-lost cousin or someone who is "within" the family.

In most wedding celebrations, the family is always included. In fact, most of the wedding invitations tend to be some sort of family reunions since many family members are present from out of town.

And because there are a large number of relatives present in the celebration, the bride or the groom will be less inclined to notice who you are or where you came from. This makes the "long lost cousin" strategy effective.

The above "crash technique" works particularly well when carrying a beautifully wrapped gift box with you. After all, who would question somebody who has brought such a lovely and beautifully wrapped gift with them.

Sidenote: Hope you're finding this useful? I have always been curious about this matter. And when I found very little quality information about it, I decided to share a part of what I've learned about it – which is why this article came to be written. Read on.

2. Try being a staff member of the wedding caterer or wedding coordinator.

In order to be able to crash a wedding, you could always pretend to be a staff member.

In a wedding, there are lots of people being hired in the planning and preparation. So one way of crashing into the scene is to impersonate a staff member of the catering company or the flower

arrangement company.

This added bonus will allow you to enjoy a very nice meal. If questioned by another guest, you could always explain that you are a friend of someone who is also at the party.

Pick the name of your choice. You can always find someone else's name when you are being asked why you are at the party or who you are with.

This is a safe tactic if you do not feel like choosing whose side of the couple you will take in order to introduce yourself. With this strategy, you can be quite sure that with over a hundred or 200 guests in the party, not many people would even think of verifying your name or identity.

4. Dress to kill.

The best part of being a wedding crasher is to dress up a little bit in order to suit the occasion. Even if it means that you were "dressed to kill," it would be better to dress appropriately in order to fit in the event.

After all, wedding crashing is not all about free food and wine. It can also be one way of finding that one true love.

5. Proper Timing is essential.

One of the most important things one should remember when crashing the party is to arrive very late. This is because by the time you have arrived, most guests have started drinking and socializing, to a point where their guard is down and there is no defense is relatively low.

As a result, when you arrive, most people will not notice your entrance and you may easily join the party and blend in.

Indeed, wedding crashing can fill up your social calendar quite quickly if you so choose.

I hope you gained something from this article. Be sure to check for additional information online on this topic. You may drop me a quick note to share your thoughts and comments on it.

There's also more to come so please keep visiting often to get the latest information!

Hanif Khaki is the acclaimed author of numerous how-to articles and the founder of the popular wedding resources site



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