

Memory of Solo Flying

Editor's note: Following is a reminiscence by a veteran member of the North East Kitefliers of England.

By George Webster

It was a fine summer's afternoon next to the North Circular Road in Ealing when a rather----no very----casually dressed man weaved his way toward me with a friendly dog on a piece of rope. He was clearly one of the winos who sat on benches in that area or over near a tube station. There was an off-license, which always had passed-sell-by-date lager, which was always Tennants.

He. After standing looking at the kite, "That's a kite isn't it?"

Me. "Yes."

He. "How did you get it so high?"

Me. "It's got a long line."

He. "Would you say kites were your hobby?"

Me. "Yes."

He. After a fair pause, "Drinking is my hobby."

Me. "Well the advantage of my hobby is that I do it out of doors."

He. "Oh, I never drink indoors, it's far too expensive." Pause. "I can't remember where I was going."

Me. "Your dog knows."

Canine leading, they head off.

Strategies for Finding Kites in Laos

Aided by a Drachen Foundation research grant, Sarah St. Vincent spent nine months doing extensive research on kites in Cambodia last year, then extended her stay to do preliminary surveys of Vietnam and Laos. Using her intelligence, energy, a lot of curiosity, and some luck, she did excellent work in all three poverty-stricken countries. Her report to Drachen on Laos shows just how ingenious she was in hunting indigenous kites.

Strategies that didn't work: Asking around at government agencies. Scanning temple art work for depictions of kites. Reading children's stories translated into English for mentions of kites. Asking a large travel agency in Luang Prabang, now something of a international tourist destination, to arrange a kite-related excursion.

Strategies that did work: Asking around in upscale handicraft stores in the capital, Vientiane. "Many people were semi-fluent in English and knew where to find odd items." Visiting small Lao-run travel agencies in Luang Prabang. "These people tended to speak English, were extremely helpful, and told me about traditional papermaking villages on the outskirts of the city. That's where I found kites." Finally, visiting the papermaking shops where she was able to discover the kitemakers, commission kites, and receive insights into the sport.



Sarah St. Vincent

Wandering into a paper shop in Ban Nong Xai, outside of Luang Prabang, St. Vincent met a Mr. Chantha who responded to a question about kites by saying he had never made any for sale but had constructed them for young relatives and would craft some for her. He turned out four, in different colors, weights, and sizes, each of a different type, and rejected St. Vincent's offer of a \$17 payment, saying it was too much. He accepted \$12. As a gift, Mr. Chantha crafted a cardboard box to transport the kites.

Lightweight wax paper kites in orange and blue colors were crafted for her by a 23-year-old named Sengphet, nicknamed Pik, whom St. Vincent met through his father, a travel agent. Although he hadn't made kites since he was a boy, Pik turned out two beautiful examples, finishing them off for St. Vincent in his backyard just outside Luang Prabang while she watched. She paid him \$10 for both.

Hunting for kites, St. Vincent ended up with a pen-and-ink drawing by accident. Seeing a young hill tribe woman selling drawings and paintings on the sidewalk, St. Vincent attempted to commission a kite with a decorative drawing on the sail. The woman misunderstood and on a next visit by St. Vincent produced a drawing of a kite being flown. It was unclear where the drawing came from, but St. Vincent happily accepted it, and paid \$3. St. Vincent says in negotiating she had drawn a standard diamond-shaped kite but that the drawing she obtained shows a traditional Lao model. She took this as possible evidence that minority hill tribesmen fly kites as well as the dominant lowland ethnic Lao.

In her investigation over two weeks, St. Vincent learned that kites are flown during the December through January windy season. A hill in the center of Luang Prabang is known as *Phu Vao*, or Kite Hill. Flying is considered a male sport only. There are several traditional Lao shapes apparently unknown in bordering countries China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia. Materials used to make kites are handmade mulberry paper, bamboo, cotton thread, glue. Bamboo trimming knives are available for sale in markets.

St. Vincent realizes she discovered just the tip of the kite iceberg in Laos. As a graduate student at Harvard currently researching domestic life in Southeast Asia, St. Vincent hopes to revisit Laos as well as Cambodia and Vietnam and continue her kite studies there.

A shopkeeper in a suburb of Luang Prabang made this kite for Sarah St. Vincent. He constructed three others as well. She offered him \$17 for all of them but he said it was too much and asked \$12 instead, which is what she paid.



Renner Nielsen