

Just back: Fishing for tourists in Laos

By Zoë Smith

A fishing trip with a difference in Laos.

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Not for tourists: A fisherman casts his net in Laos Photo: Corbis Images

"Just jump!" my guide, Sommai, shouts to me, tugging at my hand as I hover over the murky riverbank, one foot poised above the boat.

The boat in question is little more than two planks of wood nailed together and peeling with canary-yellow paint. My nephew has a Playmobil pirate ship bigger and sturdier than this. As I clamber in I notice that the width of my hips creates an almost airtight suction around my lower body – not ideal for a canoe capsize.

"Welcome to the real Laos!" Sommai grins at me, a front tooth hanging so precariously from his ruddy gums that I can't help

wanting to shake it loose. "Today you are not a tourist," he announces proudly. "Today, you fish like a local."

I nod with what I hope looks like the enthusiasm I had 10 minutes ago. We head off with the aid of two bamboo oars and a handmade motor that occasionally dips into the water, cuts out, gurgles, then kicks (or is kicked) back into action. It takes 20 minutes to make it little more than a mile upstream.

"OK, let's go!" There is a splash and I realise that the others have already leapt from the boat into the water, which is lapping at their armpits.

"Should I bring the net?" I ask as I tentatively lower myself into the brown sludge with all the grace of an elephant rolling over.

"No, no, we don't need the net," he assures me, as I wade awkwardly after him, feeling my shorts plaster to my thighs. I wonder how exactly we are going to catch the fish, and I must be speaking aloud because moments later he turns to me and says: "Don't worry, I catch them. You just help."

Catching a fish here, so it seems, is much harder than back home. There are no rods, no nets, just a dozen hands creating an underwater "wall" while the nominated poacher grasps the blighters firmly between his thumb and forefingers.

While the boys fill up a plastic bag with their fish-finger-sized catch, I flap my hands vainly underwater and manage, eventually, to brush the slippery tail of a fish.

"I found one!" I announce, beaming, and the boys snigger.

"No, no." My guide shakes his head and informs me, quite sincerely, "You must keep hold of the fish."

I give up. Wading out on to the riverbank, we dry off in the midday sun and collect

kindling from the shrubbery. The boys busy themselves by sparking up the campfire and skewering today's catch into position over the flames.

"Do you always fish like this?" I ask Sommai, eyeing the miniature forms that took hours to collect.

"Oh, no," he says, and winks at me. "This method is just for the tourists. For me, I just use the net."