

LAOS

Paa Daeng Tower, Vang Vieng, new limestone climbs. In November 1999 Kirsten Kremer and I became only the second party to climb in the southeast Asian republic of Laos, when we put up a new route on the overhanging limestone wall of Paa Daeng or The Red Cliff. Paa Daeng is situated in full view of the rapidly expanding village of Vang Vieng, itself ca 150 kilometers north of the capital, Vientiane. We first spent two days cutting a way up third and fourth class vertical jungle terrain, keeping a careful eye on the local cobras and pit vipers, and avoiding a fire ant colony near the top. We reached the base of the main wall and found to our amazement it was a very steep cave, abounding with amazing pocket and tufa features. We had both spent many months climbing the bolted routes in Thailand and always wondered if there was similar terrain in Laos, which could be protected by traditional gear. The rock proved to be the best quality Southeast Asian karst and we committed to a full trad-style route straight out of the cave and up onto the headwall. On the first pitch we found perfect threads through pockets all the way and finally belayed at the top of a large stalactite below the lip of the cave, already 10 meters out from the base of the wall. The following day we began the second pitch, which climbed over the lip of the cave right of the stalactite and onto a slightly overhanging wall of crisp pockets. This pitch was well protected by Tricams, nuts, Camalots, and threads, and ended another eight meters out from the belay, where we placed two bolts. We fixed a rope down to the first belay and descended to town. Judging by the number of cobra skins we saw, bivouacs are not to be recommended.

The third pitch involved vertical razor edges with occasional cracks, fire ants, and some scary snake grass patches. Protection was spaced but adequate. The pitch ended on a fine wind-polished ledge with a large thread. One more pitch led up an amazing overhanging wall of unbelievable-quality red karst with threads readily available. Unfortunately it ended, left of the pointed top of the face, in the most heinous razor-rock vertical jungle imaginable. We descended to clean rock and rappelled the route. Two O'clock Wall is IV+ F6c.

Throughout the last day I had noticed a saffron dot in the sea of green rice below: a monk. The previous climbing party to visit Laos comprised Americans and Japanese, who established a number of sport routes close to the Mekong. The local headman in that area appears to be unhappy about their behavior. Local people have strong beliefs in mountain, cliff, and especially cave spirits, and do not take kindly to people hammering the rock or damaging it by placing bolts. We were careful to pick a venue that avoided offending cave spirits and when we came down that night, the villagers were friendly. We had obviously passed the scrutiny of the monk and had been accepted. The rice harvest was coming and the villagers thought we'd cause bad weather for their harvest by being above the fields and angering the mountain spirits. Moral: always check with your local monk. After that we never had a problem and completed 12 other routes, which were shorter but harder. On our return the following year we were treated like gold. Laos is a place to tread lightly, not only because of the millions of land mines and unexploded bombs. Respect will get you everything. This is a Buddhist/communist country and the people are proud to have survived all their troubles, while trying to find their way in the modern world.

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