



# The Akha Experience

A Community-based Tourism Program in Cooperation

with eight Akha Villages, Exotissimo and GTZ

in Sing District, Luang Namtha Province

Lao PDR



## **Summary**

Luang Namtha Province is home to one of the largest populations of the Akha Tribe. It is here that the Akha culture is best preserved and best experienced. **The Akha Experience** motivates the Akha to preserve and share their traditional culture while at the same time gaining new skills and income generating ability. **The Akha Experience** is an experiential tour which will take the participants on a 3 day learning experience into the culture and daily life of the Akha in Muang Sing where they will have personal interactions with the villages they visit. The tour participants have the opportunity to experience first hand from the Akha themselves the Akha culture and way of life. The villagers share their life in the forest, their life in the fields and their life in the village with their guests.

Exotissimo and GTZ have combined their resources in a unique effort to provide the tourist and the village with a quality meaningful exchange; an experience where the tourist has personal contact with the Akha and where the Akha are able to fully participate in the benefits of tourism. GTZ has worked with the Akha Tribe in Sing District since 1992 and in this time has developed technical expertise in working with Akha communities. Exotissimo contributes its reputation as a Lao tour operator of high standard with a worldwide marketing network as well as its growing commitment to providing genuinely socially and environmentally responsible tours.

This tour program represents a new and important aspect of development assistance where a government funded project provides investment for a private sector business to establish a sustainable village enterprise with the aim of poverty alleviation.

## **Tourism Potential**

Since 1994 tourists have been coming to Muang Sing mainly to see and experience the rural and traditional lifestyle of its different ethnic groups. The main groups being: Tai Lue, Tai Neua, Akha and Iu Mien.

Muang Sing is an attractive destination enjoyed by most of the tourists who visit here. The simple fact that Muang Sing is a top tourist destination in Laos is proof of its potential to be developed as a high quality eco-tourism destination with significant benefit flowing to the local population. As the majority of tourists come to learn about the ethnic groups and experience their life style, it follows that a tour program which brings the tourist into the ethnic village and helps the tourist to have an authentic ethnic cultural experience with a personal touch has great potential for success.

## **The Market**

Exotissimo is the marketing and sales agent with a focus on the group tour market with organized treks. Tourists can book tours through Exotissimo agents in Vientiane, Luang Prabang or international offices. The Company also sells tours to walk-in tourists in Sing District.

Product quality is made to international standard designed to accommodate visitors of a wide range of ages and abilities. Emphasis is placed on comfort and safety as well as quality of guiding and interpretation to be able to attract high-paying and responsible tourists. The program is also designed to attract individuals interested in learning about culture, the environment and wanting to participate in a program that protects the environment and gives benefit to the villagers.

## **Tour Elements**

The 8 participating villages are situated along the base of the foothills of the Muang Sing Plain in Nam Keo Luang and Thongmay sub-district. All of the 8 villages belong to the Akha Tribe.

### **Participating Villages:**

1. B. Lao Khao
2. B. Phouyae
3. B. Houeinagang
4. B. Eu La
5. B. Tamee
6. B. Nam Hoo
7. B. Monaa
8. B. Piyer



Each tour is led by two village-based guides dressed in Akha clothes who have basic English language skills and a lot of local knowledge.

During the overnight stays in Ban Lao Khao and Ban Tamee, the guests are received and taken care of by village hosts.

Each tour program begins with an orientation session. In addition to the itinerary and the conditions of the trail, they are informed of how the tour program benefits the villagers, what is done to make the tour environmentally friendly and to visit the village in a sensitive manner.

The program includes the following elements:

## **Cultural**

- Traditional Dress
- Akha Cuisine
- Music (instrumental and vocal)
- Religion
- Story telling
- The Akha Calendar
- Architecture
- Children's Toys (making and playing with)
- Courting rituals
- Marriage Customs
- Hospitality Customs
- Education

## **Livelihood**

- Rice Cultivation (plowing, harrowing, irrigation, sprouting, transplanting, weeding, upland cultivation, harvest, threshing, etc.)
- Gardening
- Gathering forest products
- Hunting skills (bird traps, bird calling, etc.)
- Livestock

## **Environment**

- Flora (forests, medicinal plants)
- Fauna
- Relation to farming systems

## **Village Lodges**

The design of the lodges is based upon traditional house design and construction.

The concept is to give the guest the cultural experience of sleeping in a traditional Akha house. The only added comforts are: a sit down toilet, bathroom sink, a hot water shower, a food preparation area with sinks and solar power electricity and water pumping.



The lodges were built according to traditional construction practices using materials that the villagers collected themselves. The villagers did the majority of the construction. The bathroom, septic system, the plumbing and the installation of the solar water heater and photovoltaic systems had to be subcontracted to outside skilled labor.

## **Tour program “The Akha Experience”**

### **Day 1- Muang Sing- Nam Keo Noi Waterfall- Ban Lao Khao (approx. 6 hours trekking)**

Tour departs from That Xieng Tueng in Muang Sing, following the old French road to Nam Keo Noi Waterfall.

After three hours trekking through primary and secondary forest, lunch is prepared by the villagers of Lao Khao at the beautiful Nam Keo Noi waterfall. Food is cooked in the traditional Akha way using local products, forest vegetables and ancient techniques.

After lunch, carry on together with the villagers to the old village site and walk through pine forest and old growth forest before descending to their village.

On the trail the guides have a forest activity such as bird watching, collecting bamboo shoots and medicinal plants <sup>1</sup>.

Overnight at Ban Lao Khao Lodge.

While waiting for dinner, visit the village with the Ban Lao Khao hosts. Walk around the village, listen to traditional musical instruments, stories, legends while watching the preparation of the evening meal. Learn about traditional Akha architecture.

An after dinner massage from the young women of the village before going off to listen to the courting songs of the youth at the courting grounds.

### **Day 2 – Ban Lao Khao- Ban Phou Yae- Ban Houeinagang- Ban Eu La- Ban Tamee (approx. 5 hours trekking)**

After breakfast start walking to Ban Phou Yae. The trail passes through old secondary forest. During the trekking, the village guides lead a forest activity such as bird watching, collecting bamboo shoots, medicinal plants<sup>1</sup>

Arrive in Ban Phou Yae where you will be the guest of a family for lunch.

After lunch continue to Ban Houeinagang. Stop for an afternoon bite in Ban Houeinagang and do a village activity such as cotton spinning, making and playing with children’s toys, or pounding rice.

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<sup>1</sup> depending on villagers’ suggestions

Continue to Ban Eu La. Along the way do an agricultural activity like planting rice, riding a buffalo or gathering vegetables<sup>2</sup>.

Stop in Eu La Village for another snack break and visit with the village. (It is an Akha custom for visitors to stop in the village and chat before passing through it).

Continue on to Ban Tamee where you will stay overnight.

While waiting for dinner, visit with the Ban Lao Khao village hosts. Tour the village; listen to traditional musical instruments, stories and legends while watching the preparation of the evening meal. Learn about home life and marriage customs.

An after dinner massage from the young women of the village before going off to listen to the courting songs of the youth at the courting grounds.

**Day 3- Ban Tamee- Ban Nam Hoo- Ban Phiyer (approx. 3 hours trekking)**

After breakfast, do an activity with the Akha women such as cotton spinning, pounding rice or feeding the pigs. They will appreciate your attention and willingness to learn about the Akha daily life. Spend some time with the children, they will enjoy new games or you can learn theirs.

Depart for Ban Nam Hoo. Along the way share some of the agricultural activities with locals. Stop for a break in Ban Nam Hoo.

Afterwards, walk through the forest to see a magnificent view of Muang Sing. Do a forest activity with the villagers.

Lunch is served in one of the two villages of Ban Mona and Ban Piyer, where you eat with one of the families.

Visit the village handicraft store in Ban Piyer and take the opportunity to buy some handicrafts. You will be supporting the local economy and can have a beautiful souvenir or present for friends and relatives.

Take the truck back to Muang Sing.

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<sup>2</sup> depending on season and availability

# Distribution of Responsibilities & Benefits

## The Company

### Exotissimo

- Overall management
- Marketing
- Booking/Sales
- Contact provincial/district office ahead of tourist arrivals
- Profits
- Diversified portfolio



## Villages

### Management Group (16 village coordinators from 8 villages)

- Coordinate village services
- Coordinate activities among villages
- Manage rotational system
- Distribution of benefits
- Monitoring and planning



### Village Coordinators

- Inform villagers about decisions taken by mgmt group
- Coordinate services and activities in the village
- Manage rotational system

### Akha Guides

- Give interpretive information on trek
- Coordinate with villagers
- Be responsible for tourists
- Give tour around the village
- Link between tourists and villagers
- Safety and security



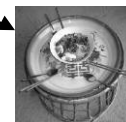
### Hospitality staff

- Receive tourists
- Tell stories/give information
- Massage
- Help built/ maintain village guesthouse



### Cookers

- Cook for tourists
- Help purchase food in the village



### Housekeepers

- Clean guesthouse
- Clean sheets/beds/rooms



### Handicraft sellers

- Produce and sell handicrafts
- Teach tourists how to make handicrafts



### National/Provincial Guide

- Accompany tourists on trek
- Help Akha guides during the tour
- Safety and security



### Tourists

- New experience, help to improve service through feedbacks.
- Contact Exotissimo agents
- Tourists revenue

## **Role of the Company**

Exotissimo is the sole sales and marketing agent for **The Akha Experience**. The Company represents the interests of the community-based tour program. It will market and book the tour program domestically and internationally through its offices and agents.

Exotissimo maintains an operations office in Muang Sing staffed by two local persons, one of them an Akha villager. The role of this office will be:

- to book and organize each tour program with the concerned villages
- to coordinate with the management group
- to provide on-going training in guiding skills and English language instruction
- to consult with villages on how to resolve problems and improve services
- to monitor the feedback and quality of the tours
- to collect data on the impact of tourism in the village
- to provide on-going planning assistance and guidance to the villagers
- to pay for services and goods provided by the villagers

Until December 2006, GTZ will provide technical backstopping to the Exotissimo office in form of trainers, advisors and limited logistical support.

## **Role of Villages**

The Akha Experience is community owned and operated. The business will be licensed at the local level and operate as a local tourism business. The business has a contractual relationship with Exotissimo giving sole rights to market and sell the tour program and fixing the rate the villagers sell the tour for.

The villages are represented by a management group with two tour coordinators from each village being members. This group meets with the company once a month to discuss training, tour operations, management and administrative issues.

As a whole this group

- Coordinates village services
- Coordinates activities
- Manages the guide rotational system
- Receives payments for service provided



- Does planning
- Does monitoring

The village coordinators:

- represent their village during the management group's meetings
- coordinate village services
- coordinate village activities
- receive payments on behalf of the village
- report to their village committees

## **Monitoring**

Exotissimo maintains jointly with the communities, GTZ and the District Tourism Office a monitoring system for the purpose of ensuring the quality of the experience for the customer, assuring the communities benefiting while at the same time identifying possible negative impacts which need to be acted upon.

The monitoring takes the following forms:

1. Socio-economic measurements are used by GTZ in the villages
2. Feedback from the customers
3. Interviews with the villagers

At the monthly management group meetings the feedback from the customers and the guides are discussed. This information is used in the continuing education of the guides and service providers and the on-going development of the program.

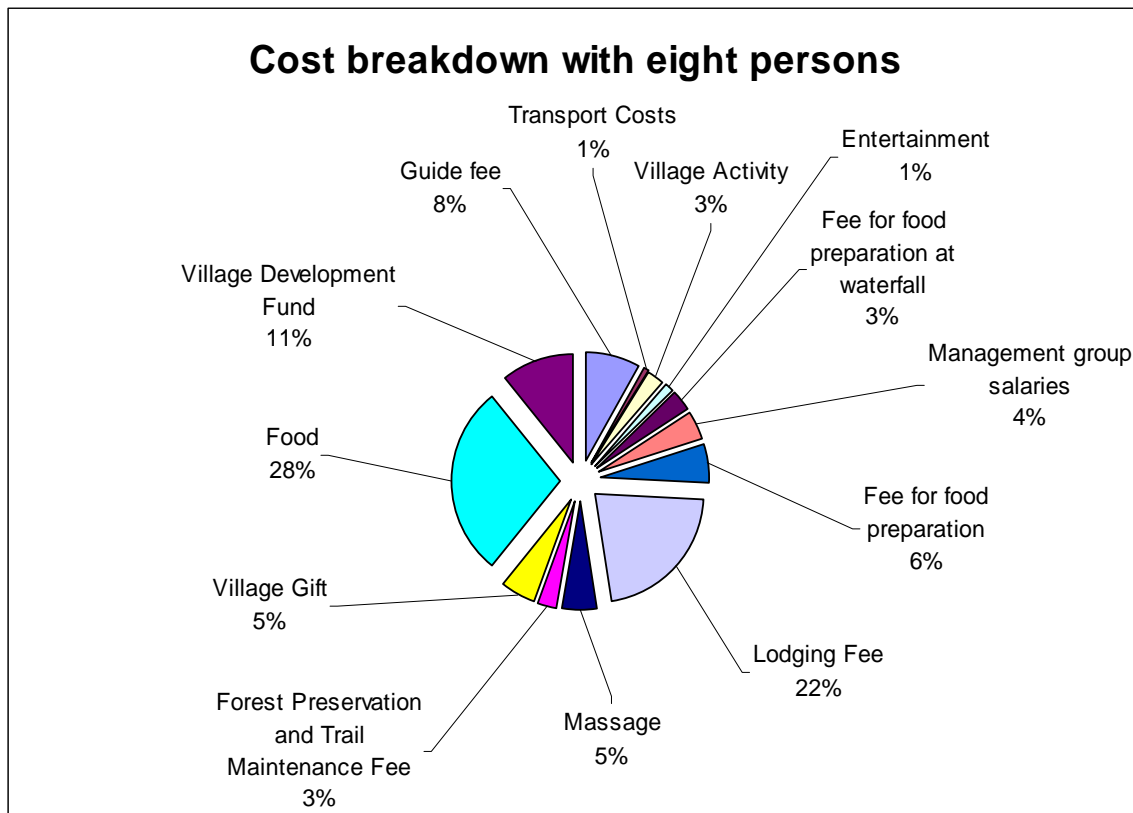
Exotissimo and GTZ report to the village management group the findings of the socio-economic monitoring. If necessary, problems and possible solutions will be discussed and will be incorporated in the following period's plans.

## Income for the villages

The maximum carrying capacity of the program is set at 8 persons per party with a twice weekly departure. The program operates 52 weeks a year.

The contract rate per program participant that the villages sell the program to Exotissimo for is as follows:

	8 Pax	7 Pax	6 Pax	5 Pax	4 Pax	3 Pax	2 Pax
Contract price per Pax	\$37.13	\$38.50	\$40.33	\$ 42.90	\$46.75	\$53.17	\$66
Contract price of tour	\$297	\$269.50	\$242	\$214.50	\$187	\$159.50	\$132



From the pie chart above, note that 28% of the benefit flowing to the villagers comes from meals. The food is purchased from a number of sellers, in this way the benefits from this can be broadly distributed.

The following table shows the estimated income for the villagers that can be generated by the tour program at three different operating capacities. It is expected that at least in the first years the program will not operate at a capacity above 60%.

Operating Capacity with average of 6 people per trip	Total Income Generated by the Program in 1 yr		
	60%	50%	40%
Income	\$12,180	\$10,150	\$8,120

As the quality of the program improves and as the villagers become more skilled from experience, the price of the tour can be adjusted accordingly, thus, providing the villagers with a chance to increase their income.

The money received from the sale of handicrafts as well as the money donated to the village school funds or other such projects are not reflected in the figures.

**The Akha Experience** has started operating in September 2005.

### **Contacts:**

You can find us on :

[http://www.ecotourism Laos.com/activities/akha\\_experience.htm](http://www.ecotourism Laos.com/activities/akha_experience.htm)

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