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Weltwärtsfreiwillige

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1. Interim Report

Laos - Lao Youth Union Vocational Training Centre

After 3 months, without being distracted by all the excitement of the newness and by the curiosity about the unfamiliar, I can say that I feel good here. “Good” as in comfortable, welcome and safe. You can tell that the community is built on trust and a sense of unity by the fact that almost all of the town is at eye level and by how the homes, stores, hair salons, spas etc. use transparent glass so people walking by could see what massage the customer is getting. People have insight to what color their neighbor’s underwear is, with their laundry hanging for any stranger walking by to see or/and take.

Recently, we took a trip to Thailand. We took a bus from Vientiane to Udon Thani, Thailand and from there, we flew to Phuket. During that bus ride we had to step out twice at some border checkpoint. We were rather skeptical about leaving our bags in the bus, so seeing Lao/Thai people walk out without any hesitation was quite interesting. Then, as expected, we as non-Lao/Thai citizens were inspected a bit differently, which evidently took longer. I remember us panicking enough to think of asking the officials to hurry, since we did not receive any sort of receipt that would guarantee us some safety like compensation, in case the bus driver decided to just drive away. But fortunately, the bus driver was waiting. And as we stumbled our way back to our seats, a weird feeling of safeness emerged within me. The strangers in that bus who once seemed whatever I associated strangers with, suddenly felt much more familiar.

Of course, we experience incidents like this, which confirm this assertion, everyday. Still, the above described experience was key to that realization, and thus seemed worth-mentioning. And as one could assume by the statements I make here, I have not been disappointed, yet.

But as someone who believes that a considerable amount of egoism, greed and a sadistic tendency is in the human nature, the option that all residents are reliable and are capable of coexisting through mutual trust seemed and still seems unreal. But since this sample of Lao people indicates otherwise, I will stop being so quick to exclude that possibility.

Thus, I find it equally remarkable to see that a society does not necessarily require a fully-functioning executive authority to maintain peace and order; that it actually seems like it is possible to go through everyday life without any issues while solely relying on the faith that your fellow human beings are trustworthy and “decent”.

Another rather striking understanding that my stay until now has encouraged, was that of racism.

There were things that I had learned about racism in theory, some even being during the preparation-seminar, which LKJ had set up for us. And some of the theories, I could validate with my own experiences as I am an Asian, who grew up in Germany. But I had not been quite able to pinpoint anything I had experienced to those rather specific concepts of racism that I had also learned of.

Like the thesis that white people, meaning people benefiting from racism or/and people who experience white privilege, will under no circumstance experience racism. This thesis called for confusion and slight outrage in the room as one volunteer identified her experience involving some verbal abuse in a refugee home as racism. The specialist settled that heated discussion by clarifying that her experience, if at all, would concern other disciplines of discrimination, like sexism. And that it is assuredly not a question of racism, for she is still a member of the white community and thus will remain privileged.

At the time, I acted like I totally understood and agreed with that specialist's point, mainly because I found it slightly preposterous that she as someone who is "white", and therefore as a fact, regardless of whether or not it was wanted, benefits from the existence of racism, would even think of comparing her experience to something called racism, which I have been struggling, dealing and living with throughout all my upbringing. But because one can only speak from own experience, and mine were limited to Germany, it was hard to verify that particular thesis, until this opportunity to see more of the world arose.

So yes, tourists, especially white people, do get looked at differently because of their skin color. But no, not the way "non-white" tourists or/and residents are treated in a Western country. The people of Laos, Thailand and presumably every developing country intuitively associate prosperity, intellect, high social ranking and everything nice and fine with white skin, and thus treat them accordingly.

Even rare exceptions, where "appropriate treatment" regarding white people is not positively connotated, like that unpleasant experience of a fellow volunteer in a refugee home, can not be seen as racism. Because when attempting to distinguish racism the focus should be on how the person is perceived. Whereas in her case, although she was not treated "accordingly", it is undoubted that her white skin was a constant and indisputable reminder of her superior social status, for racism has been of enormous importance for humanity since the very beginning.

So I have been seeing white people walking around like they are the kings and queens of this place, which is understandable considering how much they are admired, respected and worshipped for their race.

Frankly, I believe this kind of place is the perfect hideout for people, who can not keep up at home, so they come here to boost their ego. So I am a little worried that my so-called "confidence", which I believed to be the result of everything that I had seen, experienced and had to deal with for the last few months, might be stationary. But what I think is most relevant is that I am inarguably learning a lot, both intentionally and not intentionally, seeing a lot, sometimes things I would have been happy to not have seen.

And I am having the time of my life. Details will kindly remain none of your business.