



Going Home

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Part of [This Is Home: The Hmong in Minnesota](#)

In the last few years, an increasing number of Hmong-Americans are returning to visit their homeland of Laos. Others go to Thailand where refugee camps became home for thousands after the war ended in 1975 and Laos became a communist country. The visits are times to see family and friends as well as places Hmong-Americans left behind. The trip back is never simple.

NO ONE HAS AN EXACT FIGURE. Yet, estimates suggest between 5,000 and 10,000 Hmong-Americans from across the country bought plane tickets to Laos last year.

In 1998, the embassy of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in Washington D.C. issued around 10,000 visas. Officials there say most of those went to Hmong-Americans, including one for May Chou Her.

A woman in her 30s with dark curly hair, May is at home in Minneapolis packing one of three suitcases on the night before she begins a journey to Laos. Her birth family was Vietnamese-Hmong. So it's the people rather than the place that draw her to Laos. She's going to see her father for the first time since she was an infant.



May's father, Ka Ge Chang, in Ban Vian Village.

Her: I'm really anxious. I cannot wait to see him. You know this morning I woke up at 4:30 in the morning I say "oh my God, I'm going to miss the plane." I say "wait a minute. I'm supposed to be working one more day before I go."

May was seven-months old when her parents ran from gunfire in Laos. She was strapped to her mother's back when anti-Communist Hmong soldiers mistook May's family for North Vietnamese supporters. The soldiers captured and killed her mother. Her father kept running. The troops took May to a village camp where they handed her over to other villagers.

Her: One woman fed me, another day one woman fed me, so until my mom that raised me, she doesn't have many children. She only have one son, so she came and took me and adopted me. So she raised me. She took me to Thailand - to the camp - and then to the United States. And I recently lost her three years ago so that's why I planned this trip; to go and see my Dad.

May wipes tears from her eyes as she talks about the family she lost and the father she's about to see. They've exchanged letters for the last 13 years. He lives near the border of Vietnam. Travel there is unsafe so May plans to meet him in a village where a cousin lives. May is taking gifts to her family: Hmong costumes for the women, and - for her father - funeral clothes, another traditional gift. She'll be gone for a month.

Like many others, May bought her plane ticket from Classic Travel in Saint Paul, an agency built around Hmong-Americans visiting their homeland. In 1991, Chue Tsu Vang and his wife Joua moved their business from Wisconsin to Minnesota. Vang says during October, November, and December, Hmong people depart for Laos nearly every day. They're the most popular months because of Hmong New Year celebrations. But Vang says that's not the only reason people go.

Vang: The visit is not just a visit. But it's a plan for helping the family back home. And by the time many people journey back for two week, three week, for a month, and they probably work twice harder than they're working here, they try to get things done before they coming back, they return home to the US.

Hmong-Americans are finding it easier to make the trip. They're making money. And the Laotian embassy is issuing more visas every year. Still, it's a challenge. Hmong families often save for years to make the journey to see relatives and friends who are now aging and ill. The visitors take money and other gifts. Paying family debts or rebuilding homes is not unusual in a country where families earn on average \$350 annually. Vang says Laotian officials won't give visas to those they suspect are guerrilla supporters or opponents of the government. Some areas are unsafe. Unexploded bombs and land mines still dot the landscape. Vang says part of his job is to prepare his customers for what amounts to culture shock.

Vang: When the sun goes down, you have to use a flashlight. And this is one thing you have to prepare. Secondly, before you going to travel to this, make sure you going to take a shot because the food, the water is totally different. And pack a survival kit. Tylenol. Something that could help you. And if you get sick, quickly go back to see the doctor as quickly as possible. And also, do not try to eat something that is unusual.

Older Hmong travelers, now accustomed to modern conveniences, have the most difficulty readjusting to living conditions that were once just part of daily life. Month-long trips often are shortened when village life becomes too rough. Despite the obstacles, the journey is something many knew they would do since fleeing their homeland. University of Minnesota Professor Judith Martin studies place and it's meaning. Martin says leaving home is complicated.

Martin: Everything that you know, everybody that you know is in that place. And so the place and the people and your existence have all sort of melded into this thing that is you and your experience. And in that sense place is critically important because you take that away, you take away the people, you take away the activities. It, in a sense, destroys your sense of who you are.

Martin says even the grim experiences during the war and the years following won't dissuade the Hmong from visiting their homeland. She says part of who they are is still in that place.

Martin: It won't be that way for their children, but it is that way for them. And so the wanting to connect in an environment where you can connect is probably very, very powerful for that first generation of refugee-immigrants. And maybe even more powerful because they came in such a difficult situation where people didn't know what was happening to people that they cared about.

It's been four weeks since May Chou Her's departure for Laos. And after about 20 hours of air travel, May and her husband are waiting for their luggage by a baggage carousel at the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport. May looks exhausted, and appears content to be home; home in Minnesota. She says the trip was both wonderful and sad. She saw the old Hmong ways of raising animals and growing vegetables to feed a village family. She slept on a bamboo mattress and managed to avoid any sickness from the water. However, she wasn't thrilled with the lack of modern facilities.

Her: No bathroom. You have to go into the woods if you want to go potty. No bathroom. That was the worst part. And no hot water; cold water only. So we been there about a week. We only took a shower once. It was kind of bad.

Even so, the journey was worth it. She saw her father as planned. May says he recognized her right away because she looks like another sister who survived. He was pleased with May's choice for funeral clothes. And wanted to give May many gifts in return, but couldn't for lack of money. May says she and her father spent much of their time talking about what happened years earlier.

Her: I learned that it's a tragedy that I was separated from my family. It's not like I was abandoned from my family. So that was a big

surprise. It was a tragedy that we were separated.

May says her father wanted to keep her there. But she's a married woman and a mother now. Under Hmong tradition he doesn't have the right. It's unlikely May will ever see him again. At 70 years of age, he might not be around until May saves enough money to return a second time.