

A Close Encounter With a Monk and a Chocolate Muffin

A muffin in Laos

We woke to the bang-clang of metal against metal. The *tak bat* had begun.

My husband and I slipped out of bed and into shoes. We left the hotel room door open, just so, to the street, but prayed our small son would continue to sleep as the meditative procession of monks started to move through Luang Prabang.

Dawn after dawn, the faithful feed the faithful. Orange-robed monks walk barefoot and single file. They receive handfuls of sticky rice, fruit, incense, and sweets from men and women who sit or kneel, shoeless and sashed, along the route. No one speaks.

The daily Buddhist ritual of almsgiving knits the community together, as it has for hundreds of years. Pots full of food let the receivers focus on spiritual concerns, rather than earthly ones. Generous deeds help givers earn merit for the next life.

Rules for observing are simple, if self-evident: no touching, no talking, no blocking the flow. No eye contact, no crop-tops, no crowding. No flash photography, no in-your-face photography. For the love of god, leave the selfie stick in your suitcase. In short, don't be a fool. Or a toddler, a group not generally known for its dignity or decorum. So we watched, and waited, and stutter-stepped toward our room if we heard so much as a sigh.

When a murmur threatened to tip over to a wail, my husband jogged into our hotel and returned bearing our tuckered blond boy. Right away he reached for me. Tugging his airplane jammies over his belly, I put a finger to my lips. He put a finger to his lips, and popped in a thumb. We touched heads. The youngest monks were only a few years older than him.

“Are they holy men?” he whispered, echoing our explanation of the people who lived in the temples we'd visited the day before. He called the dollhouse-sized shrines outside of stores and restaurants “palaces,” and begged us to stop and admire each one.

In a heartbeat, an elderly monk appeared in front of us. He stuffed a chocolate muffin into my son's hand, the plastic wrap crinkling. He stroked his cheek, and grinned a great big grin. Before we could do more than smile our thanks, he'd blurred back into line.

Later, in the hotel's courtyard, we drank coffee and watermelon juice, and split the muffin three ways.