



# Making Pots in Laos

Andrea Maitland

## ILLUSTRATIONS

above -  
Sunset at sea

below -  
The tour party in a  
Buddhist retreat.  
Third from the left:  
James Danish

Ceramics is an art, a craft and a way of life. A group of travellers from North America and Britain found all three studying pottery in a small village in Laos last spring.

Ban Chan sits on the west side of the Mekong River. Intense communal effort produces large single-

fired red pots for lanterns and food storage for Luang Prabang, a small city a short boat ride away.

None of us speak Lao, and the people of Ban Chan don't speak English, but potters can find ways to communicate and we were accompanied by a brilliant transla-

tor and guide, Phonsavan Bilavarn, who magically appeared whenever hand gestures failed us.

Lao potters sit on or close to the ground and work on a hard-wood wheel used as a banding wheel to build coil pots. Momentum comes from the toes of the potter or a







second potter pushing the wheel around. In either case, the posture is next to impossible for an aging westerner.

Crouched on a small bench, I found it hard to work with my right ear in close proximity to my right knee. It didn't bother the Lao though. They have made pots this way from early childhood.

The gritty red clay is mined by village women from a nearby pit and minimally processed before being used for roof tiles, bricks or pots. The people of Ban Chan also make ingenious little stoves used roadside everywhere in Luang Prabang.

We were in Ban Chan to learn how to make pots, Lao style.

The potter lays down a circular bottom, and then adds coils, pushing down with his thumb as he goes. When the pot is about six inches tall, he begins to compress the clay, using two hard wood ribs. Coil after coil, he works, gradually tapering the sides of the vessel in and out to a graceful shape. After about 45 minutes of two potters working together on this process, a large functional pot emerges. It's lifted off the wheel to wait in the sand for firing. No trimming and no

hair driers are involved.

The clay has no plasticity whatsoever. There could be no question of throwing a pot like we do at home. In my clumsy hands, it was like trying to throw sand. Better potters in our group had more respectable results, but all of us

were impressed with how well Lao methods matched the difficult materials at hand. None of us was able to build anything like their pots.

Ban Chan kilns are built deep into the clay foundation of this Mekong River village. Villagers dig

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

above -

**"MAKING POTS IN LAOS"**

*A method combining coiling, beating and throwing*

*The relatively wet coils are laid on the rim of the pot, smoothed into the walls and thrown into shape - and then more coils are added.*

*Like many techniques, this one developed from necessity. The local clay is not very plastic and could not be thrown to such a size.*



left -

*Transportation in the village*





a triangular pit, and then tunnel in a few feet before opening up a cavern to hold the pots. Another tunnel comes the surface as a flue. Once the cavern is loaded with pots, villagers stack hardwood by the doors to the cavern and set it on fire.

Once the pots are pulled out of the still-hot kiln, that's it. There is no glazing process, though some may be stained. The resultant pots are not food safe but the Lao find many uses for them.

A couple of serious potters from England went home with what

sounded like great ideas for their work. The few non-potters enjoyed the village as well... playing a ball game with the villagers, joining a visit to the school that serves all the surrounding villages.

For me, the best part of Ban Chan was simply being there, in a community where everyone works together. Toddlers are everywhere as their parents make pots. Chickens and dogs wander about.

I was delighted to sit a few inches from the dusty ground watching a very different life unfold around me.



#### HOW WE GOT THERE

*We travelled to Laos and Cambodia with ceramic artist Denys James who runs Discovery Art Travel out of Salt Spring Island in British Columbia, Canada.*

*He specializes in guided tours for potters. This one took us to the small and deeply religious city of Luang Prabang (place of the Golden Buddha) in Laos and the mammoth temple city of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.*

*In addition to potting in Ban Chan, Denys introduced us to two Luang Prabang potters whose methods were different from the villagers.*

*The non-potters had a good time too, as all of us revelled in the peaceful beauty of Luang Prabang and its many temples and religious sites. Just having dinner on the banks of the beautiful and historic Mekong River was thrilling to me.*

*With Denys and our guide and translator, Phonesavan Bilavarn, we visited the magnificent Tat Kuang Si waterfall (which I'd recommend to anyone for its sheer beauty and cold, clean water) the Pak Ou Buddhist caves and a play in the national theatre in Luang Prabang.*

*Phonesavan is a dedicated Buddhist. She took us to a Buddhist retreat where we danced to a Lao folk band and saw an ancient restored temple in a retreat for Buddhist monks.*

*When we reluctantly left her, we flew to Siem Reap in Cambodia where Denys had arranged another excellent guide to the ruins at Angkor Wat. It's a place that should be seen by anyone who travels to that part of the world.*

*You can find out more about Denys James and his tours at [www.denysjames.com/](http://www.denysjames.com/)*



#### ILLUSTRATIONS top to bottom -

- the "flue" of the buried "kiln"
- stoking the kiln
- small pots are still bonfire fired
- small stoves are made besides other vessels
- storage jars fired in the "kiln" illustrated above
- below - the pots ready for shipment on the Mekong

#### Andrea Maitland

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