

Adventure!

THE PROVINCE

GET OUT THERE!

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The jungle is open

Five British Columbians make the first commercial whitewater rafting trip in Laos **STORY, Page D3**



—Kevin Vainily photo

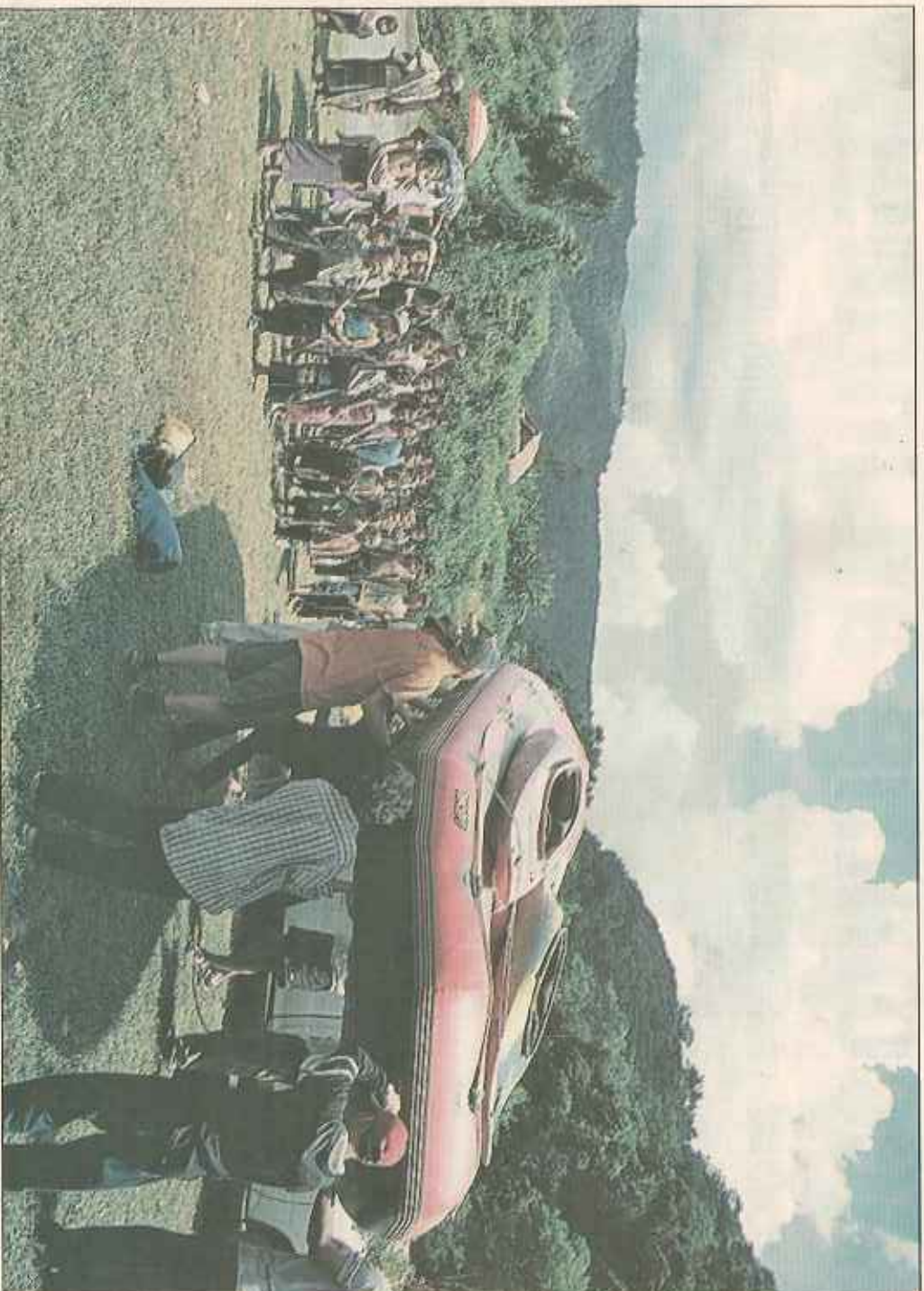
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- **HIKE TO HOLLYBURN:** Dawn Hanna explores early skiers' trails **Page D2**
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drawn by:
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—Kevin Vialley photos

ABOVE: The expedition's head guide explains the menu during a lunch stop at the side of the river, while guides spread food out on banana leaves on the ground.

LEFT: The tour group and guides draw a crowd of villagers as they unload the raft and get ready to put in at the start of the trip.

Laotian raft trip a first

British Columbians join in as former communist stronghold opens up to adventure tourism

By Frank Wolf
Special to The Province

The medicine man and 30 or so children kicked up a cloud of dust as they circled around and stared at Josh blankly like he'd just stepped off a hovering UFO.

They'd never seen the likes of Big Josh from Vernon before. He was 6-foot-2, 230 pounds and quite well fed — by far the biggest "falang" (foreigner) to ever enter into Ban Nalan village. The biggest man in their village stood maybe 5-foot-5 and weighed a duck thirty.

We all guiped and looked around when the medicine man told us he'd seen a tiger two weeks before. He was certain that the village hunter who'd gone missing three days earlier had provided the big cat with its meal that day. Big Josh would be the ultimate notch in that tiger's belt.

Ban Nalan is a roadless tribal village located in the heart of the isolated Nam Ha Biosphere Reserve in northwestern Laos, a 220,000-hectare site sandwiched between the Chinese and Burmese borders in Southeast Asia, where UNESCO (United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has established an ecotourism project.

The area is one of the largest and most diverse pristine jungle habitats on earth, with a healthy population of tigers, leopards, deer, sun-bears and more than 300 bird species. The Nam Ha river is the snaking, sinewy vein that runs through this emerald paradise.

Big Josh was one of five British Columbians lucky enough to be the guests on the first commercial whitewater rafting trip in the history of Laos, a formerly closed communist country that has recently loosened restrictions and opened up its land of jungle-covered mountains and river valleys to tourism.

Last year, Australian Mick O'Shea laid the groundwork for the trip by partnering with local businessman Inthay Deunansavanh to create Wildside-Laos, the first professional outdoors company in the country. I had met Mick a couple of years earlier while whitewater kayaking in Malaysia and kept in contact with him via e-mail ever since. He told me of his plans to raft the Nam Ha and I was irresistibly drawn along with fellow Vancouverite and photographer Kevin Valley.

Mick trained local people as guides to navigate rafts down the Class 3 Nam Ha and share with clients their unique knowledge of the flora, fauna and mysticism of

the area. The food is simple Laotian fare prepared by the guides. Mixing the rafting experience with local river culture, the journey stops overnight in an indigenous village where paddlers share in traditional customs and hospitality.

Before we set off, Mick tried to hustle up a few more adventurers for the trip at the cafe in the local town of Luang Namtha. He came back with three people, all from B.C.: Jen Lee, a film maker from Vancouver, Greg from Vernon and, of course, Big Josh. Thousands of miles from our homes, the river gods had convened and determined it would be an all-B.C. first descent.

The narrow, winding, river required precise navigation by our guides as the raft maneuvered between submerged bushes and slots with several blind corners. High-quality rapids with metre-high wave trains soaked us as we plowed through pounding spray. The major difference between rafting in Laos and B.C. was obvious after we went through the first wave. The water was bathtub-warm instead of the bone-chilling variety we're used to at home. Ahhh.

Between rapids, we were treated to a staggeringly beautiful natural paradise. On either side of the river, bamboo, betel nut vine, palms, banana trees, liana vines, and strangler fig spilled in a tangled mash of green and brown for hundreds of feet from the top of the valley to the river's edge.

Towering teak trees with their ivory trunks loomed high over us on either side. Gibbons squawked from hidden perches. A Sambar deer bounded out of the shallows and into the shadows like a skipping stone. A five-foot long constrictor swam through some light rapids in front of the raft. Kingfishers, river chats and redstarts darted in and out of the black jungle crevices. The twisting, turning path of the blue-green water sent us inexorably onward through sets of standing waves, over river-wide fish traps and under rickety bamboo and vine bridges.

The highlight was our overnight stay in Ban Nalan, whose inhabitants had seen only two foreigners before we arrived. We were welcomed into a central stilted bamboo hut with a feast of water buffalo meat, wild vegetables and gallons of Lao rice whiskey. As new friends from different parts of the world, we enjoyed life on the river into the wee hours of the morning.

Rafting the Nam-Ha

Information about Wildside-Laos and rafting the Nam Ha can be obtained by contacting the Luang Namtha tourism office at 086-342-047 or by e-mailing the Nam Ha Guides Association at namhaguides@hotmail.com. Online, you can visit the Wild-Side website at wildside-laos.com