



FIRST PERSON

The laid-back joy of playing pétanque with the locals in Laos

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Clutching a hollow metal ball, I stand inside a small plastic ring on the ground that's about the size of a bicycle tire and pretend I'm the kind of person who understands sports. My nervous system, however, remembers basketball in middle-school gym class: the free-throw line, the echo of sneakers on hardwood, the ball rebounding off the backboard like it had personal issues with me.

“Let's go, Mom!” shouts my teenage son. I'm snapped back in reality on a sun-drenched gravel court in Luang Prabang, Laos, about to throw my first pétanque boule.

I lift my arm, pause long enough to regret every decision that led me here, then release. The ball lands softly, rolls a little and lands around 15 inches from the target. “Not terrible. Actually, pretty good,” I think, and exhale. Somewhere deep inside, my long-buried gym-class humiliation melts away. For a few seconds, I feel the glory – I’m a pétanque champ.

First Person: Giving up bad words for my New Year’s resolution is going great. Just ask my swear jar

Called *petong* in Lao, the French lawn-bowling game involves tossing metal balls (*boules*) from a designated circle closer to a small target ball (*jack* or *cochonnet*) than your opponents; the first team to reach 13 points wins. It’s similar to bocce, the Italian lawn-bowling game, but requires slightly different balls and terrain.

Pétanque came to Laos during the French colonial period at the turn of the 19th century. Laos was granted full independence in 1953, but French influence abounds in the country’s well-preserved colonial buildings, baguette- and pastry-stocked bakeries and countless coffee shops. Then there’s *petong*, played much the same way as pétanque is in France.

Gathering for a lighthearted game is how locals unwind after work, sometimes even during lunch breaks – much as it is in rural France. It’s intended for all ages and fitness levels and is so beloved in Laos that it feels less like a pastime than a shared ritual. The game is simple and accessible – all that’s required is 12 metal balls and a smaller target ball and a flat gravel or dirt surface. Playing *petong* serves as a way to socialize with friends and family, often while drinking and eating barbecue in parks and other public spaces throughout the city.

Our tour guide, Phong, tells us the game is especially popular with Lao civil servants, retirees and older men, who gather in the late afternoon and evening to socialize, often with bottles of Beerlao and plenty of chit-chat.

I get my own taste of this culture at Nam, a multi-lane, outdoor *petong* hall at the end of a dirt road, a five-minute drive from the Mekong River. We appear to be the only tourists, which is a good sign when you're looking for something authentic and a bit off the beaten path.

This scene plays out before my eyes. On one side of us, six men in their late 20s smoke cigarettes and play, their arms swinging forward with careful precision, like a pendulum. There's lots of laughter and cheering and, I get the sense, a fair amount of trash talking. Thankfully, they don't pay attention to me being schooled by Phong and my two boys, ages 16 and 20, who have somehow figured out the game within minutes.

The boys are stuck with their unco-ordinated yet fiercely competitive mother, while my husband teams up with Phong and one of the bar's soft-spoken servers, who has perfected her toss and accuracy.

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Between rounds, we gather at a picnic table to drink beer and nibble on fried peanuts seasoned with spicy kaffir and lemon grass. Much like an after-work game of pickleball back in Toronto, the game is laid-back and fun because it doesn't require too much physical exertion or pre-planning; it's a great spur-of-the-moment activity that feels inherently social, as if the rules are secondary to the stories shared between throws.

I can see why *pétanque* is so popular. There's something about the gentle clink of metal balls, warm evening air and playful chatter that puts me at ease. I haven't once grabbed my phone or been tempted to doomscroll, and for the first time in days I don't feel like I need to rush off to the next must-see attraction as we tour Laos and Thailand. As a tourist, there's not much more you can ask for than to feel completely at home in a place you've only just discovered.

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