



Open
the
road
to
the
future
of
Laos
Open
to
the
future

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Boten Special
Economic Zone





Boten SEZ

LAOS

Laos

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was established in 1975 by the communist Pathet Lao movement and has remained under its authoritarian rule since. In the decades since, Vientiane has largely enjoyed a friendly relationship with China through their shared political ideology and, from the 1990s, business ties.

Find out more about this project, visit [The People's Map of Global China](#) website:

- Country Profile: [Lao People's Democratic Republic](#)
Written by Wanjing (Kelly) Chen and Juliet Lu
- Project Profile: [Boten Special Economic Zone](#)
Written by Jessica DiCarlo

Boten: From Dawn till Dusk

Text by Jessica DICARLO

Photos by Nicholas BOSONI

Travellers crossing the Boten–Mohan border from China into Laos pass through the ‘Belt and Road Lane’ before descending concrete steps to a paved road lined with Chinese flags, palm trees, and flowering shrubs. Walking towards Boten, Laos, the road turns to dirt and a golden stupa that marks the Lao border station appears (see Images 1 and 2). Beyond it, a billboard greets visitors: ‘Boten: The first international hub and new city of the Trans-Asian Railway in Laos’ (磨丁: 泛亚铁路老挝首站国际化的枢纽新城). The Boten Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is considered the ‘first stop’ in Southeast Asia on the Laos–China Economic Corridor and Laos’s largest project to date in terms of capital investment.

However, Boten has undergone dramatic changes over the past two decades. Far from a flourishing city, the story of this border-town SEZ is a case of boom to bust—and perhaps boom again. It evolved from a remote border crossing (before 2000) to a booming casino town (2007–11). However, the zone developed a reputation as lawless and violent, rife with crime, prostitution, gambling, smuggling, and rumours of murder. After a notorious period as a casino outpost, Boten was shut and much of the population left the zone (2011–15). It is now an active construction site and city-in-the-making (2016 – present). With the Belt and Road Initiative and the construction of the Laos–China Railway, Boten’s strategic location has been seized on as an investment opportunity. Under Haicheng, the new Chinese developer, the SEZ is being refashioned into an urban and tourism centre, as well as a trade and logistics hub. Today, it is a highly speculative space, envisioned and marketed as an international city that will host high-rise apartments and as many as 300,000 to 350,000 residents by 2035. Labourers on the ground enact the zone through cycles of mundane, long work hours interspersed with lively performances of a city yet-to-come when VIPs or investors are in town. The following photo essay and short article take us to the streets of Boten to share the rhythms, pace, and experiences of city-making at the Laos–China border.



Visualising the Symphony of Construction

Rhythm in Boten: a low vibration hangs over the city day and night, acting as the bass on which the cacophony of steady and repeated patterns of sound, movement, and experience are built. If one stands, eyes closed, in the middle of the zone, a symphony rises. Tractor engines chug and sputter, moving massive mounds of red earth. The occasional jackhammer jolts the senses away from deeper tones and throaty sounds of tractors. Cement mixers turn, mimicking the drone of a didgeridoo. Increasing in pitch, metal on metal creates a chorus, shrill and distinct. Saws on rebar rise and fall in timbre. The frenetic sounds of drills and hammers hasten the tempo. One can feel the weight of sledgehammers as they rise and fall, at times slowing the tempo to something akin to *adagio*. Rhythms also entail more than sound. The crisp morning air, not yet filled with the dust that hangs in the afternoon heat, carries smells of noodle soup and *baozi*. In the evening, the chorus of construction machinery dampens, yielding to clinking glasses and muffled music from KTV bars. On one backstreet, tables are piled with barbecue and bottles of *pjiu* of both the Lao and the Chinese varieties. As the sun sets, construction dust gives way to cigarette smoke and the boisterous voices of workers gathering for dinner.



Repetition makes these rhythms and sensual experiences especially apparent. At times, it becomes challenging to differentiate one day from the next. This sentiment extends to the lived experiences of people in the zone, as the following essay details. The narrative arcs of both the photos and the essay on Boten that we publish in the following pages trace a journey through the construction-site-city, from early morning through to the night, showing a snapshot of the zone and the people living and working in it. On one level, the photos convey a sense of limbo and suspension across the vast grayscale construction site. It exists as an expanse of land levelled for visions of a global city. However, on the city streets, where the music of construction echoes, photos offer snapshots of the lives that support Boten's revival. From the wider landscape, Nicholas Bosoni zooms in to make portraits of the people whose labour and hopes are the very foundation of the zone. ●

The Future Boten

(Previous page)
The construction of Boten train station two kilometers south of Boten, in Laos's Luang Namtha Province, in February 2021. (Above) A miniature replica of the future Boten on display at the JingLan Hotel in Boten. Source: All photos in these pages were taken by Nicholas Bosoni.



Construction Sites

Trucks transporting raw products out of Laos approaching the border check post in Boten. November 2020.