



Ruth Foster takes a *sideways* look at

CALENDAR GIRLS



What image does this title conjure up for you? The Pirelli calendar perhaps, glamour and eroticism? Or maybe something with fewer pretensions to 'art'? I started my working life in a large printing house and the calendars there were quite a shock to my feminine - and feminist - sensibilities. Maybe it evokes something quite different? The British film of this title is based on the true story of a group of mature, respectable women who posed nude for their own calendar to raise money for Leukaemia Research. These stalwart ladies from Rylstone Women's Institute in Yorkshire became an overnight sensation when the calendar featuring them, posed tastefully and chastely behind their knitting, ironing, flower arrangements and jam jars, was published.

After three years in Vientiane, I have seen more calendar girls here than in my whole life to date. As with many things in Laos, they have a particular charm and character of their own. In 2005, 2006 and 2007 a succession of gorgeous young ladies graced my kitchen, courtesy of Lao Telecom. 2008 has been the first year that I have not had a willowy beauty standing next to my water cooler, thanks to the excellent WIG calendar, with its combination of beautiful photographs and practical layout, and which at last included the phases of the moon.



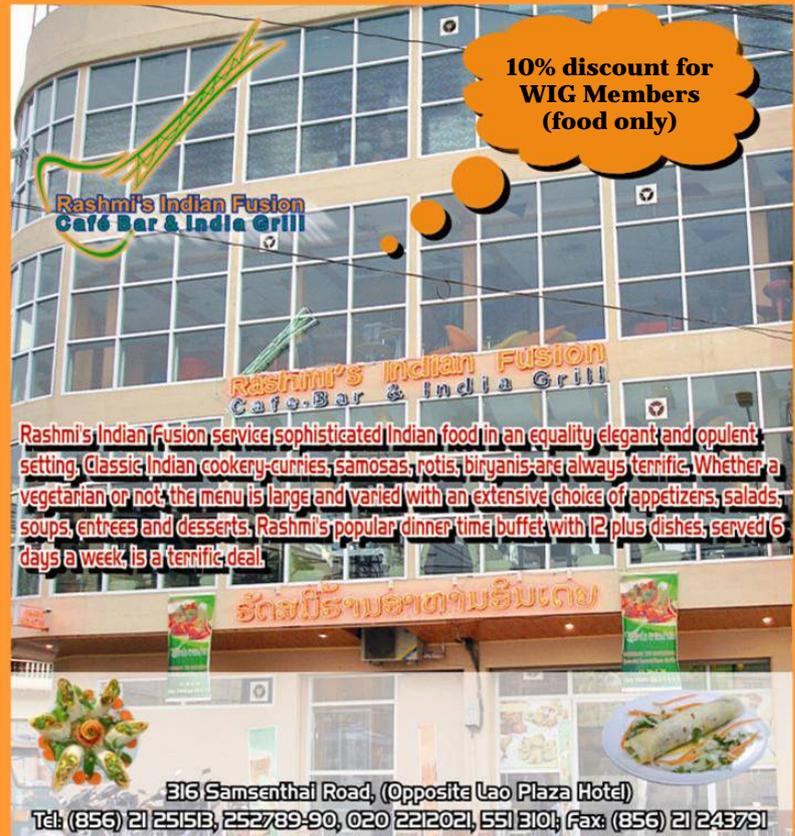
Before that, I needed one for noting my engagements and another to keep track of 'Buddha days' etc. The new improved WIG calendar rendered a second calendar unnecessary.

So I no longer have calendar girls adorning my walls at home, but I still get to see them almost everywhere. Whether the calendar is promoting Beer Lao, ETL, Lao Tobacco, or Lao Telecom, the girls conform to certain norms. They are always beautifully dressed in traditional lao costume, elegant sins and pretty blouses or gorgeous silk evening dresses. They have fair skin, sleek shiny hair and immaculate finger nails. They are strikingly beautiful, whether glamorous and aloof or with more down-to-earth looks. There are few shops or offices which do not boast at least one of these calendars. In many places, they stay up long after the year has wound to an end. Most calendar pictures are displayed for two months and sometimes three, so anyone with a lao calendar gets to know the face and figure of each damsel really well.

In 2007 Miss Sanydha Luanglad was my hands-down favourite. She wore a pretty peach silk evening dress and stood in front of an ornate stencil-decorated picture frame and a night-time view of the Namsong River at Vang Vieng. She smiled winningly at me through July, August and September. Her three companions were also beautifully dressed: in palest pink (January to March), luscious red (April to June) and a green that lay between jade and aqua (October to December). The dresses managed to be slightly daring and demure at the same time. The silk shimmered and each dress was trimmed with exquisite embroidery and traditional motifs. The other girls posed in front of pictures of the Plain of Jars, the Tat Sae Waterfalls, and the Khone Pha Pheng Waterfalls.

All four were immaculately groomed, with pale, pale skin, delicate manicured hands and finely sculpted eyebrows. Each had carefully chosen jewellery to complement their clothes. Their hair was carefully styled and the same make-up artist appeared to have been hard at work. Every girl had luscious lips parted over pearly white teeth in a dazzling smile. They adopted almost identical poses with their hands clasped lightly in front or to one side, and had the customary slim figures that young lao women seemingly always have. So why was Miss S my favourite? My friend Sabine had the answer; it was her eyes. Cover up her mouth and the smile was there in her eyes. It gave her smile a genuine character that the other beautiful girls lacked. So Sabine and I agreed that Miss S was the prettiest that year. I guess some executive at Lao Telecom spotted it too, because she showed up again on the promotional page, this time wearing a long-sleeved blouse with her hands joined in a graceful nop, different jewellery, but the same hairdo and the same warm, friendly smile.

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When I arrived in late summer 2005, I found the elegant Miss Siphachan Sithongsay already installed in my house. She gazed coolly at me with an enigmatic half smile until the end of September. Her glossy black hair hung straight down her back and her costume was described as 'modern lao'. Bare shoulders rose above a strapless top, but my eyes were drawn to the exquisite embroidery in her sin. Miss Malivanh Phommany saw the year out in a typical Hmong costume with all the trimmings.

However she was clearly no Hmong, and with her high-heeled sandals and very long finger nails as well as her pale complexion, she really didn't look the part. The following year Lao Telecom opted for the more abstract theme of the elements. Thus the four models represented Earth, Water, Air and Fire. This time there was more variety in their poses and expressions and their evening dresses were floaty and dramatic.

If I have restricted my comments to the Lao Telecom calendars, it is purely because those are the ones that I am most familiar with. Overall there is remarkable similarity in style and content between the different institutions or businesses

producing them. Sometimes the models are employees of the company. (I understand that the girls working for Lao Tobacco who featured in one calendar received numerous marriage proposals!) The girls in one Beer Lao calendar appeared to be sitting in or next to waterfalls rather than in a studio. The juxtaposition of evening gowns with all that water was somewhat daring and slightly suggestive.

This year I forewent the company of calendar girls, unless you count the ladies who adorned the pages of the WIG calendar in March and August. 'Wisdom', captured by Seamus Anderson and 'Wonderful Ethnic Diversity', shot by Andy Schroeter both stole my heart; 'Wisdom' with her calm dignity and 'Wonderful Ethnic Diversity' (or 'All dressed up...' as I chose to re-caption her) with her wonderful quirky style. Both ladies had healthy ruddy complexions, and the beauty that comes with age and experience. Their lovely, lived-in faces had real character.

So what has prompted my musings on calendar girls? Well, actually it was a calendar spotted recently at my workplace. A sweet-faced young lady, with girl-next-door looks, reaching across an automobile. No long-legged model draped across a car bonnet, she was washing the car! The calendar was produced by an insurance company and she was promoting car insurance. In November she will be replaced by another wholesome creature wearing a crisp, white blouse and leaning forward over the handlebars of her motorcycle.

As 2008 draws to an end, I look forward to getting my new WIG calendar for 2009. It will once again have pride of place in my kitchen. This year I have been conscious of an empty space next to the water cooler. So, maybe I'll invite some lovely Lao ladies to keep me company once again.

Ruth Foster