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The array of Buddhist figurines, bracelets, ornaments, pendants and chop-sticks shone creamy-white under the shop spotlights in their display cabinets.

The Laotian woman behind the counter passed the wares to her Chinese customers who held them admiringly and carefully inspected the workmanship.

And she openly assured the would-be customers that the intricately carved pieces were ivory from Africa, the most desirable source, handing them a pen-torch to check for the pinkish hue that indicates high quality.

"The best," she boasted in Mandarin, as other shoppers studied the list of contents in bottles of tiger bone wine.

In the cases next to them was a much more expensive luxury – rhino horn - sometimes carved into trinkets, but usually offered as bark-like strips on sale in jars, to be ground down, dissolved into water and drunk for "medicinal" purposes.

The store was one of several in a squat concrete market on the outskirts of Vientiane, the capital of Laos, that is the new Asian shop-front for the carnage of some of the world's most majestic wildlife.



Some of the carved ivory items on sale in Laos CREDIT: PHILIP SHERWELL FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Elephant, rhino and tigers are being slaughtered in tens of thousands in Africa and Asia to satisfy the demand

of predominantly Chinese consumers for products and "traditional remedies" made from their tusks, horns and bodies.

The Chinese government has in recent years clamped down on the illicit wildlife trade within its borders. So smugglers and buyers now conduct much of their business in their southern neighbours of Vietnam and particularly Laos – the "Wild East" for wildlife trafficking.

The Telegraph visited San Jiang market following information supplied by the Environmental Investigation Agency, a London-based international campaigning organisation that tracks and exposes global environmental crime.

"Laos has emerged as a safe haven for wildlife criminals as international syndicates seek weak spots where enforcement is poor and corruption thrives," said Julian Newman, EIA's campaigns director.

Combatting this sickening trade in endangered species is close to the hearts of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge who this week toured a wildlife sanctuary in Assam, India.

They were told about anti-poaching initiatives, yet just hours later the scale of the crisis was brutally illustrated when a rhino in the same park was shot dead and its horn backed off.

With Prince Harry, the royal couple have founded United for Wildlife to work with leading charities to fight the scourge.

Commenting on The Telegraph's reporting from Laos, a Kensington Palace spokesman said: "It is absolutely vital that these markets are dragged out of the shadows and people learn the truth about what is going on.

"United For Wildlife and the Duke of Cambridge are completely committed to doing everything they can not only to protect animals but also to reduce demand on the ground because that is the only sustainable solution to the problem of poaching."

A royal source said the Duke, who is aware of the market in Laos, will "have significant focus on reducing demand in South East Asia" later this year.

And a major anti-poaching summit will be held later this month in the Kenyan capital Nairobi attended by African leaders and international conservationists, as well as celebrity campaigners such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Nicole Kidman and Elton John and philanthropists George Soros, Paul Allen and Howard Buffett.



Rangers from Kenya's Elite Anti-Poaching Unit survey the site where 10 elephants were slaughtered by poachers in Tsavo East National Park CREDIT: EPA

There will watch the burning of 120 tons of seized ivory, the largest ever pyre of tusks, intended to send the message that poaching and trafficking do not pay.

But, Mr Newman noted, "those efforts will fail as long as markets in Asia remain open for business". And as The

Telegraph discovered at San Jiang, those markets remain highly lucrative.

We were shown one garish ornament carved out of rhino horn that weighed 321 grams. The seller did the numbers and came up with a price of \$53,450, but offered to knock off the \$450 if we bought there and then.

In its carved form, the rhino horn was retailing at a head-spinning \$16,600 for 100 grams. Uncarved, it sells for about \$6,000 for 100 grams – more expensive than gold - making a cut-off horn from a larger animal worth about \$200,000.

The horn is usually ground down and dissolved into boiling water in China and also Vietnam where it is believed to have restorative qualities ranging from curing hangovers to cancer.

More affordable are the ivory trinkets and jewellery. Ivory has long been a much sought-after commodity in East Asia and newly affluent Chinese buyers are now driving the market.

In San Jiang, nearly all the buyers and many sellers were Chinese. The prices were quoted in yuan, conversations were conducted in Mandarin and the shop names are written in Chinese script first and then sometimes Lao.

On offer were chopsticks at \$290 a set, pendants at \$380 and bracelets for \$500 upwards. The price was again calculated by weight, with carved ivory, fetching \$6 per gram. The seller was asking for \$3,729 for an elaborate eight-inch high Buddhist statuette.



The \$3,729 figurine on the scales CREDIT: PHILIP SHERWELL FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Bottles on nearby shelves offered tiger bone wine and bile harvested from captive battery bears, while Buddhas shaped from the beaks of endangered hornbills were also prominently displayed.

Behind the counter, a manager casually held several wads of \$100 bills half-an-inch thick – a graphic visual indicator of the monies involved in the business.

I was the only Westerner there, posing as a British tourist looking for an unusual present, accompanied by a local Chinese-speaker. The sellers were wary about my presence, but they allowed me to take photographs of items on sale so that I could show them to a friend who was advising me on my purchase.



Chinese writing on the signage outside the shops in the market CREDIT: PHILIP SHERWELL FOR THE TELEGRAPH

With the guide, they showed no such inhibitions, immediately offering to befriend him on WeChat, a messaging application popular in China and widely used to conduct illicit wildlife trades.

When I asked whether I needed an export certificate to bring the items through customs, the sellers laughed. After all, as there is no legal cross-border trade in ivory, then there can be no paperwork to authorise it.

"No problem," said one vendor, deploying her only language, then patting her pockets and telling the guide that I should just carry any smaller purchases with me.

There are also websites offering helpful hints on how to carry them on flights – one tip is to wrap the ivory in tinfoil to throw off X-ray machines.



Some of the ivory products on sale at the market including a \$3,729 figurine CREDIT: PHILIP SHERWELL FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Laos, a small landlocked communist-ruled state, has become such a hub due to its strategic location in South-East Asia, weak law enforcement and widespread corruption. Located down a street less than a mile from the Mekong river, San Jiang is conveniently close to the city's airport for Chinese shoppers.

"Almost all of the ivory on sale in Laos comes from elephants slaughtered in Africa," said Mr Newman of EIA. "The

failure of Lao authorities to honour their international obligations and clamp down on the open sale of ivory is appalling.

"The situation for Africa's elephants is dire. About 30,000 are being poached for their tusks every year, and the scale of the loss is outstripping natural replacement, threatening the long-term survival of the species.

"For Africa's endangered rhino populations, the outlook is even more parlous. Since 2008 5,940 have been poached, out of a wild population of about 25,000. In 2015 alone 1,338 were killed, the sixth year in a row the number has increased.

"This slaughter is being driven by escalating prices for rhino horn in the main markets of Vietnam and China for pseudo-health benefits, black markets that Laos is culpable of openly supplying."

In a report entitled Sin City, the EIA and Education for Nature Vietnam last year documented how a corner of north-western Laos, the so-called the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GT SEZ) in Bokeo Province, has become "a lawless playground" catering to the desires of visiting Chinese gamblers and tourists who can openly purchase and consume illegal wildlife products and parts.

International records show that Laos was implicated in at least 11 major ivory seizures between 2009 and 2015. The combined weight for these seizures is more than 10 tons of ivory – representing the equivalent of more than 1,500 dead elephants.

Laos has also gained global notoriety as the base for several wildlife-trading operations. Best-known is the one headed by a businessman known as Vixay Keosavang – the "Mr Big" of the international trafficking world.

In 2013, the US government offered a \$1 million reward for information leading to the dismantling of his syndicate, which is said had affiliates in South Africa, Mozambique, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and China.



A Thai craftsman in the Surin province carves a Buddha figure CREDIT: JONAS GRATZER/GETTY IMAGES

Mr Vixay remains a free man, his business intact, and told one journalist that he worked with Laotian officials.

Laos has twice been sanctioned under CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) the international agreement between governments governing such activities.

The country has acknowledged the challenges. In a speech to mark the UN-designated World Wildlife Day last month, Sommad Pholsena, the minister for natural resources and the environment, pledged that Laos would implement CITES and crack down on businesses trading endangered wildlife.

Also last month, Vientiane hosted a meeting of law enforcement officials from border areas of Laos, Vietnam and China to discuss regional moves to tackle wildlife smuggling.

But there have so far been no significant prosecutions or convictions or major seizures, unlike in neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam.

As the state-run Vientiane Times noted: "While governments in the region have provided a political voice to

combatting wildlife trafficking networks, this is yet to translate on the ground and trafficking networks continue unabated."

Additional reporting by Gordon Rayner in Assam



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