

Northern light

A luxury paradise is emerging among the preserved edifices of Laos' northern city Luang Prabang, where two rivers and two worlds meet

Luang Prabang's change in status from remote outpost to burgeoning tourist mecca has been relatively swift since a modern airport was finished in 1998, and this culturally rich northwestern town is most easily reached from Bangkok or even Ho Chi Minh City, with carriers Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways and Vietnam Airlines all putting it just a few smooth flying hours away.

This convenient option has lately transformed Laos' former royal and religious capital of around 22,000 into a beacon for discerning travellers and overworked vacationers. Arriving in the late afternoon, Luang Prabang lies gleaming serenely in the dying sunlight, its ochre spires, old wooden shop houses and leafy, somnolent roads cast in a tangerine glow. Therapeutic chants rumble on the breeze from a monastery across the road. It's the closest thing to a civic pick-me-up you'll ever experience.

If you're a fool for the leafy, romantic streets of Hanoi, the faded colonial architecture of Phnom Penh or Hoi An and the religious drama of Chiang Mai's old wats, you'll be equally besotted by this lesser known cultural cache, nestled into Laos' northern mountains. Laos' communist government only opened the country to tourism in the early nineties, its hesitancy explained, perhaps, by the fact that during the 1960s, more bombs were dropped on the tiny country by the US than were used in World War II. Laos also spent time under the French in the early 1900s. Although Vientiane has sprung up and sprawled out as capitals do, the rest of the country is remarkably undeveloped and the north remains particularly elusive. Hill tribes here are less in touch with the outside world, and tigers can still be spotted in its topmost reaches.

Some reports speak of a place of captivating charm and fantastically intact heritage, evidenced by buildings

The entrance to the Royal Palace Museum, which houses murals, statues and other regal paraphernalia. It is a treasure trove of Laotian knowledge, whether religious, royal or revolutionary.

such as The Royal Palace (now a museum), which was built in 1904 for King Sisavang Vong and his family. One of the reasons UNESCO intervened here in 1995 is because of the town planning structure, which dates back to medieval times, something seen in only a handful of places. Tiny neighbourhoods make up the whole, each arranged around a wat and a pond. There are about 34 wats – one for every occasion. Wat Saen is keeper of the monastery's racing boats and one of the most striking, the small, quaint Wat Pa Khe, houses an impression of Buddha's footprint. The heavily gilded Wat Xieng Thong is the most popular complex, and showcases a beautiful mosaic of the tree of life, along with the royals' old golden funeral carriage. All are breathtakingly beautiful, but feel real and active. Younger monks carry out cleaning chores, others bend over Sanskrit texts in shady corners. Many will stop what they're doing to shyly practise their English.

As old as the place may be, it has learned how to shape up for the twenty-first century traveller. After Luang Prabang Airport was installed, intrepid pilgrims were overtaken by the more sophisticated traveller. Its restaurants, hotels and spas have upgraded accordingly (under the beady eye of UNESCO) and today the city is the master of the double act. It may ooze antiquated charm on the surface, but contemporary Asian interiors and fine culinary adventures lie within.

Two of the five star options that greet the Luang Prabang visitor are literally palatial. In 1992 Villa Santi, a former royal mansion, became one of the first high-end hotels in northern Laos, and though small it is still one of the grandest. Swathes of polished rosewood give the place an old world aroma and the stately dining room makes dressing for dinner a distinct possibility. The Maison Souvannaphoum hotel channels glamour from the more recent past. Laos' last



River boats nestle sleepily in the gloaming along the banks of the Nam Khan.

royal prime minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, used to live here and it is a light, breezy affair with a large lush garden and a classic 1950s-style pool. Wide verandas and an Angsana spa lure guests out from their rooms, and the place achieves a secluded feel, though it's just a stone's throw from the action.

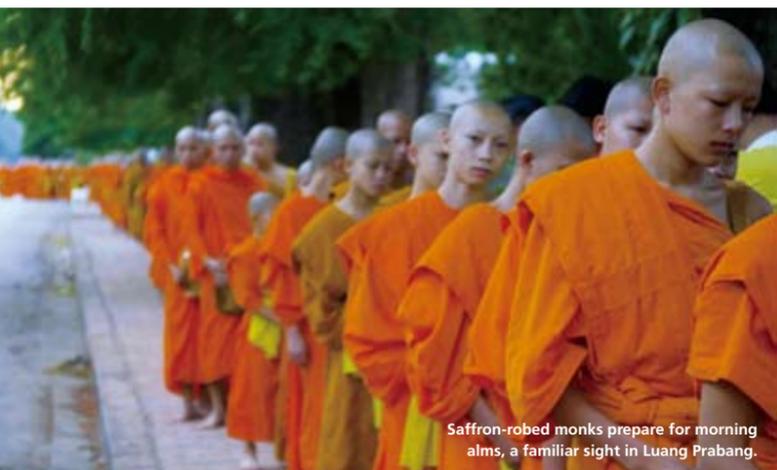
More modern still is La Residence Phou Vao, slightly out of the hub, on a hill. The hotel's spectacular sunset perch is famed and, gin fizz in hand at the bar, you will not be disappointed. The only step up would have been the view from the infinity pool. This spa hotel, under the luxury Oriental Express brand, was not renovated from royalty, but it pretty much serves it, depending on your definition of the word: both the King of Cambodia and Mick Jagger have stayed here.

Much of Luang Prabang's charm lies in its scale though. The short walk between the main street and the riverbanks turns up a variety of converted boutique hotels, all looking to put a little hip into heritage. The Apsara does

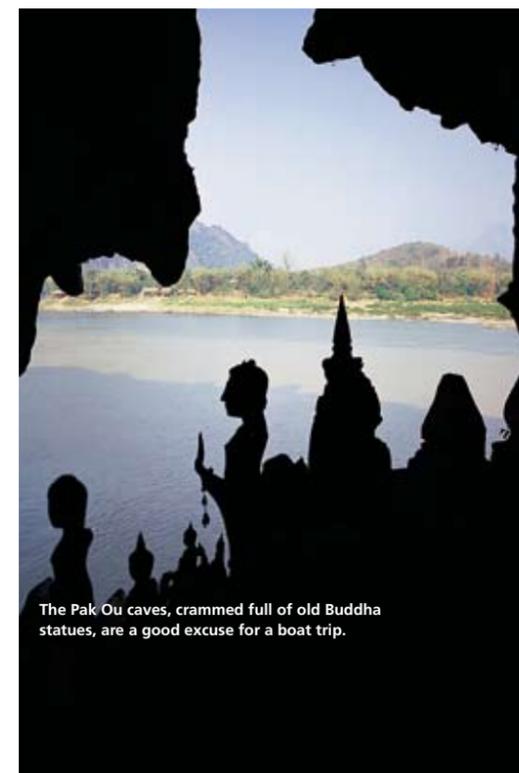
this with industrial concrete floors and the driest martinis in town, while The 3 Nagas, near the banks of the Nam Khan, goes for a more minimalist approach.

All of these establishments boast excellent dining options. Lao cuisine may not have travelled far but it is appreciated for its distinct flavours: spicy, savoury and often loaded with raw, fresh herbs and galangal. You're also rarely far from crisp white tablecloths and a decent wine cellar: the French did not have a hand in this country for nothing. Over the past 10 years the international and fusion scene here has matured, and a few independent restaurants in particular offer an exhilarating experience.

L'Elephant Restaurant Français is at the top of its game. Under French management, the place is all wood paneling, modest chandeliers and lazy ceiling fans, and offers a menu du chasseur, often featuring game from the surrounding forests. Consider wild boar in a Luang Prabang chanterelle sauce or crème brûlée with coconut. Near the night market, the Blue Lagoon Cafe & Restaurant comes



Saffron-robed monks prepare for morning alms, a familiar sight in Luang Prabang.



The Pak Ou caves, crammed full of old Buddha statues, are a good excuse for a boat trip.



The Garden Room at the Maison Souvannaphoum hotel.

highly recommended by staff at Phou Vao. "International and Laotian cuisine and Swiss management – good cuisine and atmosphere," notes resident manager Denis Simonne, also extolling the virtues of the traditional Laotian menu at the 3 Nagas.

Steamed fish with coconut is a specialty of the *Coleur Cafe*, a small elegant bistro that offers 'cocktails et jazz', and drinks on the roof terrace of the *Samsara Restaurant and Gallery* are a must. Down by the Nam Khan riverside things get a bit more local. Low-bottomed fishing boats drift by on one side, while ladies on bicycles coast by on the other, bundled up against the sun. Being there at its off-peak hottest and least busy was like vacationing on a stunning, high budget movie set peopled by a small cast of convincing extras.

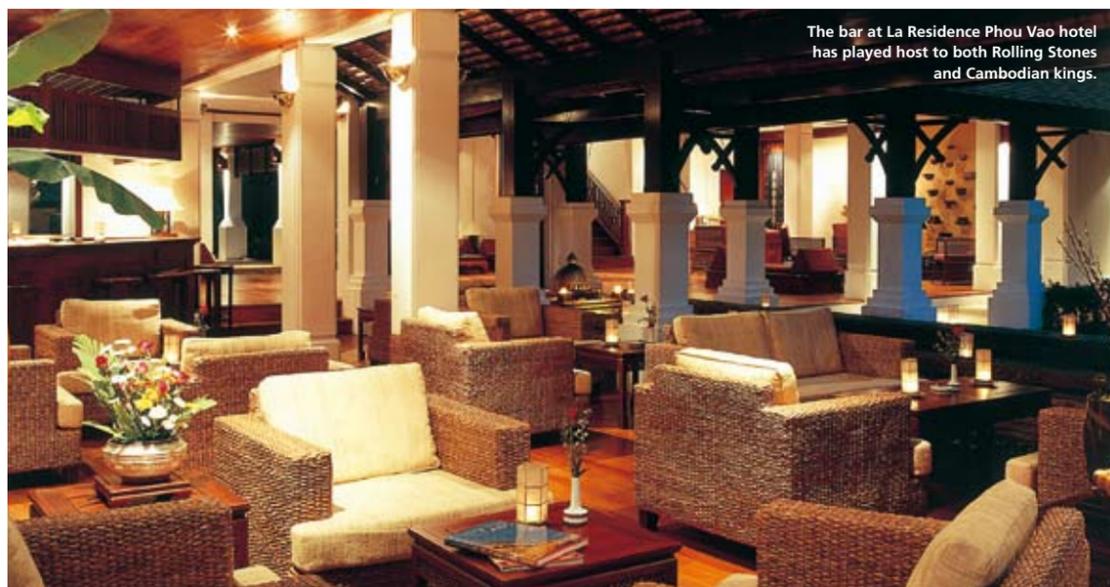
Though tuk-tuks and taxis hover semi-discreetly, the old quarter is easily explored on foot. It's a skinny peninsular, less than a kilome-

tre square, and lies at the confluence of two rivers – the Mekong and the Nam Khan. The main thoroughfare, Xiang Thong, is a postcard-worthy street lined with shop-house-restaurants and small hotels, and you can wander the length of it in about 15 minutes. Early mornings see it come alive at 6am for *takbat*, a gliding procession of brightly clad novice monks receiving alms. Sleepy-eyed travellers mingle with residents and are usually rewarded with hypnotic, technicoloured photographs – splashes of bright orange against the dusty pink hues of a morning sky. Choose a respectful, effortless distance for your *takbat* experience: recline on your balcony, a steaming cup of Laotian coffee in hand.

The heat of the afternoon sends all but the tuk-tuk drivers scurrying for shade on Xiang Thong. One refuge, *JoMa*, is a Canadian-owned organic bakery that blasts coffee-fueled air-conditioning. Its pastries are flaky and delicious, the owners often around for a chat, and upstairs the *Mulberries* boutique showcases a range of free trade clothes and accessories worth perusing.

Few can leave Luang Prabang with luggage that weighs the same. As night falls and the stupa on the small, forested *Phou Si* ('Sacred Hill') provides the perfect perch for sunset groupies, part of Xiang Thong gets cordoned off to traffic below. Merchants pour in, a few in traditional garb, and it quickly becomes awash with night market produce; a swimming, shimmering landscape of gleaming silk swatches, bedspreads, lamps and handmade toys.

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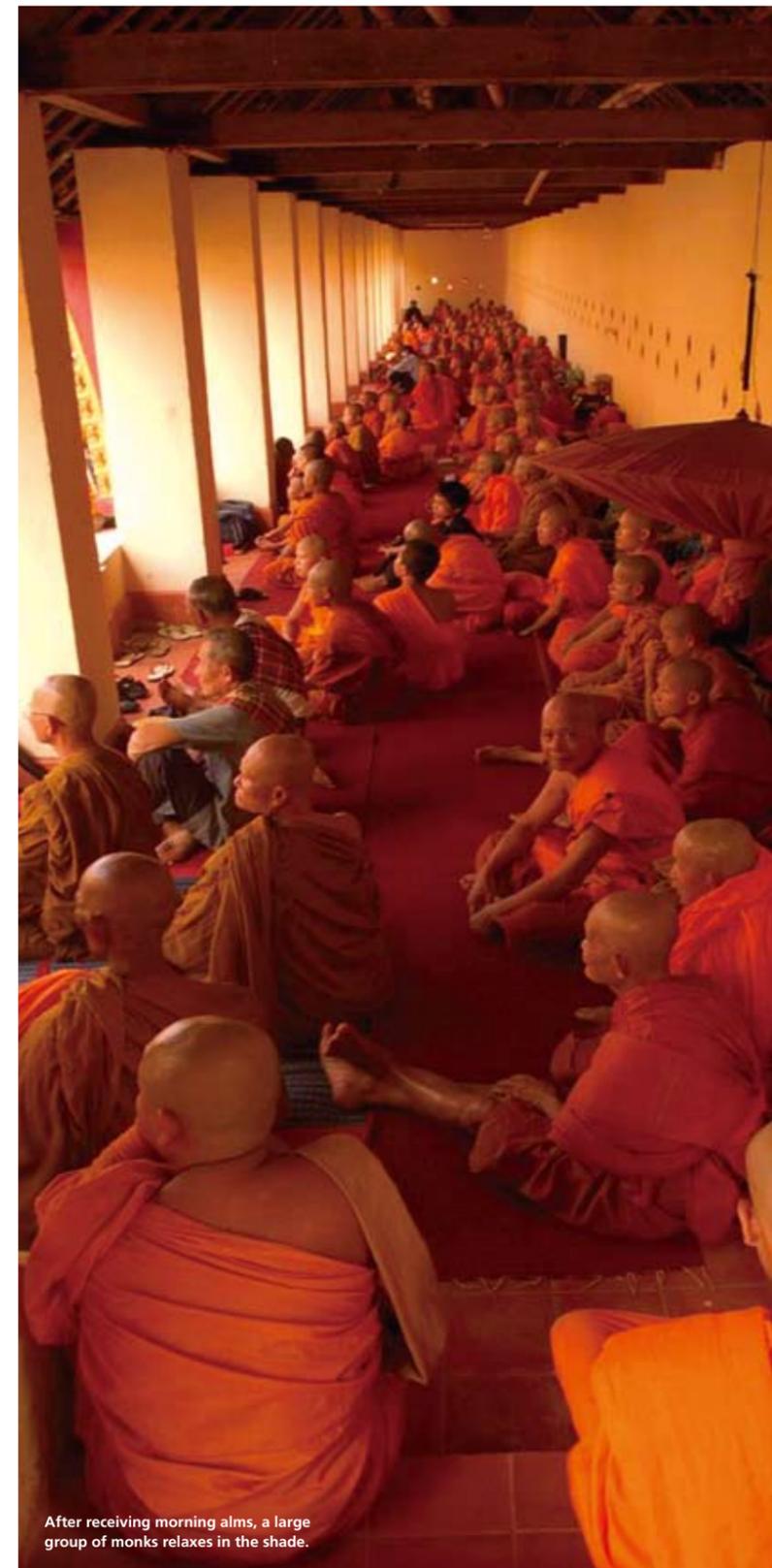


The bar at La Residence Phou Vao hotel has played host to both Rolling Stones and Cambodian kings.

Although many of the villages in the north are known for their skill at weaving, finding a great piece of silk or cotton in the markets can be a challenge. But one source that is worth seeking out is *Ockpoptok*. One of the co-founders, British photographer *Joanna Smith*, set up the organisation with a Lao weaver friend, to help provide a sustainable link between the more remote, impoverished villages and tourist demand. The shop works with the Lao women's union and development agencies to help train villagers in product design. "They may be expensive," she remarked, as it's around US\$100 (HK\$780) for a small aquamarine wall hanging, "but they're nothing like the quality or workmanship of the stuff in the night markets." Regular exhibitions at *Ockpoptok* take visitors into the technicalities and cultural significance of Laotian weaving, making use of *Smith's* photography skills.

Travellers with extra time tend to head for the hills, and Xiang Thong supports a number of adventure travel companies. You can take a day trip with *Tiger Trails*, which specialises in small, eco-adventure excursions through hill tribe villages and beyond. It is one of the firm's easier options – a relaxed ramble through dry bristling hillsides, visits to a few obliging *Kamu* villages with their stilted houses and piglet armies, and a kayak trip down the Mekong. Most *Tiger Trail* excursions involve a meal or a few nights stay at its luxury eco-lodge, the *Lao Spirit Resort*, and you can enjoy a memorable meal in the open air restaurant being eyed by the establishment's tame owl and listening to enthusiastic pop song renditions by the *mahouts* (elephant keepers) across the river. Another arresting spot is the *Pak Ou* caves, about 25km from Luang Prabang by boat. The caves are packed full of Buddha statues, most of which have been donated by local people.

Though those that look can find more to Luang Prabang than its historical hub, most visitors choose to miss the urban sprawl of its suburbs: the basic business hotels, utilitarian shop fronts and motorbike traffic. Many residents are quietly impatient with the preservation of their pristine city centre and the building codes that thwart its progress. They are just coming across the twenty-first century after all – it must be infuriating to be told that the past is more in fashion. Still, with the modern tendency of cities to choose commercialism over cultural assets at every turn, you find yourself glancing around more than once, and whispering a quick word of thanks to UNESCO. This intoxicating blend of heritage and handsome hospitality, it seems, has many more seasons ahead. ▀



After receiving morning alms, a large group of monks relaxes in the shade.

Text: Jo Baker Photos: James Phillips/Angsana/La Residence Phou Vao