

Nikkei Magazine July 15, 2017

A dream garden blooms in Luang Prabang

Laos's first botanical garden reawakens connections with herbal heritage

PETER JANSSEN, Contributing writer



Entrance to the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden near Luang Prabang in Laos (Photo by Peter Janssen)

LUANG PRABANG, Laos -- What do you do when your pet elephant enters his period of hormonal frenzy, or musth? One answer might be to pay a quick visit to the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden in Luang Prabang, the ancient royal capital of Laos, for some advice. The 10-hectare garden, which opened to the public in November, includes a special plot of medicinal plants for pachyderms, the majestic animal which gave Laos its original name -- Lan Xang -- or Land of a Million Elephants.



A sign in the medicinal plants for elephants garden. Laos used to be known as the Land of a Million Elephants. (Photo by Peter Janssen)

"Sometimes they are fed gourds (Cucurbitaceae spp.) but this is done mostly to curb their amorous desires," advises one placard in the elephant garden. "For diarrhoea they give it Bael fruit, or mak toum (Aegle marmelos), which also has the advantage of improving the animal's moods." Such local wisdom is fast disappearing in Laos, along with its elephants, which are now down to an estimated 1,000 in captivity.



Rik Gadella, whose dream of creating a garden in Laos has been realized in the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden. (Photo by Peter Janssen)

Dutch national Rik Gadella, the founder of Pha Tad Ke garden (named after the adjacent mountain which is known as "the mountain to unite and resolve,"), arrived in Luang Prabang as a traveler 10 years ago for a week's stopover but, charmed by the laid-back, ancient temple-studded city on the banks of the Mekong River, decided to stick around for three more months to catch up on his reading.

"I came here on a holiday and fell in love with Luang Prabang," Gadella said of the city that has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. When he decided to look for a place to build a bungalow and practice meditation, he stumbled upon the Pha Tad Ke area, about 2 km downriver from the city. An entirely new path opened up for him after some Laotian friends bought the grounds and then leased them to him.

"I felt I wanted to do something to help Luang Prabang's development and I thought there is not much to engage people in nature ... That's when the idea of a botanical garden came up."



The cafe at Pha Tad Ke (Photo by Peter Janssen)

Sitting in the cafe in the garden surrounded by greenery, a lotus pond and an increasing chorus of bird song, Gadella, 53, recalled the eight long years it took to complete the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden after he drew up his first business plan. "The birds started to come back after we opened the garden."

Transferable skills

Gadella, who had spent 25 years working in the high-octane art and publishing world in Paris and New York, knew little about Laos or its flora when he jumped into botanical gardening, but he had plenty of experience in setting up cultural ventures. He started Picaron Editions in the Netherlands, a publishing house dedicated to the arts, and after moving to Paris in 1992 launched the ArtistBook International fair and Paris Photo Fair, while curating various exhibitions and running his own art galleries.

Before coming to Laos Gadella had sold off his Paris-based company that focused among other things on the annual Paris Photo photography fair. "I was looking for something new," he said. Much of the windfall from the sale went towards launching Pha Tad Ke, the first botanical garden in Laos. Access is by boat, a pleasant 15-minute ride along the river from town.

The garden is built on land that was formerly the site of a hunting pavilion owned by the viceroy of Luang Prabang -- Laos put an end to the monarchy when the country became communist in 1975. The site has already become a cultural feature for the city, which drew 469,586 foreign tourists last year. "We are sending people there," said Bounthieng Soulivanh, president of the Luang Prabang Travel Agents' Association. "It's good to have another tourist attraction. The tourists may stay another day."

Pha Tad Ke cost \$1.5 million to launch, but after Gadella's initial funds ran out, finding additional finance for the project was not easy. "He tried to secure a loan from AFD, the French development bank, but in the end he could not meet their requirements for a million dollar guarantee. "I raised \$400,000 in grants, donations left and right and I got some loans from friends, but last year I got fed up and took a small loan from my uncle and we did the construction on the buildings -- the reception area, the cafe and ginger garden," he said.



The ethno-botanical garden section at Pha Tad Ke, which is separated into 10 different themes (Photo by Peter Janssen)

Now, the garden has eight sections on display, including an ethno-botanic garden exploring the historic relationship between local people and plants, a ginger garden, limestone habitat, Pha Tad Ke Cave, an arboretum, a palm garden, an organic and education garden and an orchid nursery. The entry fee is \$25 for foreigners and \$10 for locals. Most visits last three to four hours and can include lunch at the restaurant which offers all visitors free samples of three herbal teas from the garden.

Collaborative project

Gadella, who readily admits he is no botanist himself, collaborated closely with the National University of Laos, the Queen Sirikit Botanic Garden of Chiang Mai, Thailand, the Singapore Botanic Garden and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in planning and designing the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden. It took about seven years to collect the flora -- there are about 1,500 species on display -- and to conduct the scientific research on the plants, as well as completing the landscaping and buildings. The landscaping was done by his local Laotian staff, who now number about 40.

"Everything we have here we had to collect ourselves," Gadella said. "Luang Prabang is a Heritage Site so nature and ethno-botany is part of that heritage. We have been doing a lot of field trips, collecting plants, collecting ethno-botanical data."

There are no plant nurseries in Laos and little research has been done on ethno-botany -- the use of plants for medicine, food and handicrafts by Laos' many ethnic minority groups. "Eighty percent of the Lao population live in the mountains, lots of them with no real access to modern medicine so they are still using these plants," Gadella said. "In Thailand this data has been written down and researched but here in Laos, it is mouth to mouth and it is disappearing fast." After gathering such data of ethnic cures for disease, a second step would be doing more research on the efficacy of the plants, he said. "How much [of traditional cures] is shamanistic and how much is the plants themselves."

Having completed the first phase of the botanical garden, Gadella is now planning phase two, which will require an additional \$4 million investment. He wants to complete the garden's mist house for orchids, create a herbarium, better nurseries, a rice field and a research and training center. "We are collecting knowledge and no one else is doing this," Gadella said.

Hopefully he will not need to count on his rich uncle to finance the second phase of the garden's development. "Since we opened it's getting much easier," he said. "People see we're serious. I've got money coming in and people see I've done what I said I would do. It's not a pipedream anymore."