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SETTING THE BENCHMARK FOR HIGH-END TRAVELLERS



The A-Z of Luang Prabang.



Clockwise from top: Azerai Luang Prabang. Amantaka. The Night Market. Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao. On the Mekong River. Manda de Laos restaurant.

Luang Prabang, which translates as 'Image of the Royal Buddha', is an unspoilt urban idyll in north central Laos; 2 hours by air from Bangkok. It consists of 58 small villages; 33 of which comprise the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Luang Prabang; a culture-

rich peninsula on the Mekong and Khan Rivers. Overlooked by Mount Phousi and its 16th Century Watermelon Stupa, it is an architectural joy, with its 19th and 20th Century French Colonial buildings, over 32 temples, or Wats, and, increasingly, a raft of excellent restaurants and shops.

Essentially, Adrian Zecha put Luang Prabang on the high-end map when he opened Amantaka in 2009. Now he returns with Azerai, a new concept that embraces this extraordinary town, which has flourished over the past few years, yet has managed to retain its cultural integrity.

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At Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao, Mountain Pool View, #504, is ready for a refurbishment; especially the bathroom, with its in-tub shower.

ping, then Luang Prabang is hard to beat. Last November saw the opening of Rik Gadella's extraordinary **Pha Tad Ke Bot-**

this unique project is jaw-dropping; the range of plants and trees incredible.

Nine distinct areas range from an Ethnobotanic Garden to an Orchid Nursery and Arboretum; but that is not all. The reception area and shop could have been designed by Jean-Michel Gathy, such is its flawless style; but no, it was created by a talented local designer. Equally, the Café is so good that people are journeying here just to taste the excellent local cuisine. So, instead of doing the usual tourist circuit of visiting the rather underwhelming Pak Ou Caves, put this

crafts from the Lao hill tribes. The market, which opens from 5pm to 11pm, is opposite Azerai and stretches the full length of Sisavangvong Road, with four rows of stalls lining the road; the shops and cafés also open for business.

For high-end Lao design, the best shop I found was the Canadian-owned **Caruso Lao**, which is located right at the end of Sisavangvong Road. It has a stunning array of carved wooden objects, bowls and rare wood jewellery, together with silks and woven items, and yes, I did upset my Bank Manager here!

For foodies, an absolute must on your culinary journey is dinner at **Manda de Laos** on Norrassan Road.

Set on a UNESCO protected lotus pond, the restaurant meanders across wooden walkways and bridges and features world-class Lao family cuisine in a uniquely beautiful setting. The presentation of each dish is a delight for the eye, as are the subtle flavours of the various regions of Laos.

I know that I do not normally include activities and restaurants in these pages, but given that Azerai Luang Prabang is very much part of the local scene, I wanted to give you a taste of what is on their very elegant doorstep. Do go.



Luang Prabang's Night Market showcases crafts from the Lao hill tribes.

anical Garden, which we reached via long-boat along the Mekong; a great recommendation by the Azerai front desk.

The amount of work that has gone into

on your list of activities and stay for lunch.

As the sun goes down, head for Luang Prabang's **Night Market** and stock up on hand-crafted Lao greetings cards and hand-



The extraordinary restaurant, Manda de Laos, set on a UNESCO protected lotus pond, serves delectable local fare in a unique setting.

