

# PHA TAD KE



A colourful *Etlingera elatior* or torch ginger flower at Pha Tad Ke gardens in Luang Prabang, Laos.



The delicate lady slipper orchid.



*Heliconia rostrata* or hanging lobster claw.

*Justine Tyerman has trouble believing the flowers at Pha Tad Ke gardens in Luang Prabang, Laos are real . . .*

PICTURES © Justine Tyerman

**O**ur guide Vieng asked me why I had to touch every flower I saw at Pha Tad Ke gardens in Luang Prabang. "I'm just making sure they are real," I replied as I stretched to touch a particularly bright red flower and nearly fell into a pond.

The flowers at Pha Tad Ke gardens, the first botanical gardens to be established in Laos, were so lush and exuberant, they looked artificial . . . but they were all 100 percent genuine, I can assure you.

The gardens were founded by Dutchman Rik Gadella who fell in love with the UNESCO-listed town of Luang Prabang a decade ago while on a "soul-searching pilgrimage" across Asia, and decided to stay and create the first living collection of the flora of Lao.

Work began on the site in 2008 on land

that was once a retreat and hunting lodge for the Lao royal family, and Pha Tad Ke opened in November 2016.'

You could easily spend a day wandering around the shady pathways to the ginger, palm, bamboo, organic and educational gardens, the arboretum, mist house, caves and orchid nursery. The ethno-botanic garden is especially absorbing, full of medicinal plants and natural remedies. And the tropical flowers are a riot of colour, shape and size.

Pha Tad Ke is cared for by over 50 Lao staff and a team of dedicated scientists including botanist Bryony Smart, a New Zealander who has been working at the gardens since it opened. What a surprise to find a Kiwi there!

Bryony, who was previously a botanist at Kew Gardens in London, says working at Pha Tad Ke is a totally different experience to an established botanic garden.

"My role here is very diverse, and I really enjoy the opportunity to have a hand in all the scientific work, from field work to publications to education and public engagement," says Bryony.

"I also enjoy being a big part of shaping the botanical programmes for the future, and building the foundations for the work at PTK in years to come."

Recent work has included doing field trips with partner organisations to collect and assess the plants in several different locations in Laos.

"We also run education courses in horticulture, botany, ecology and ecotourism, and have published 'Pha Tad Ke: The Mountain to Untie and Resolve', our most recent book.

"Our organic garden was also started a few months ago and provides students and visitors with information on organic horticulture methods," she says.

"As the first ever botanic garden in Laos, we want to develop a regional research centre with an excellent living collection of

the flora of Laos, and provide opportunities for botanical research, collaborations and education.

"We are focused on contributing to the sustainable development of the region and supporting conservation in Laos."

The gardens are a real credit to the vision of their founder, Rik Gadella, and the passion of the team who have transformed a swathe of tropical jungle into 10 lovingly-landscaped, uniquely different gardens. A cool, tranquil oasis on a hot day in Luang Prabang.

Lunch at the breezy open air Pha Tad Ke café was also a superb experience — we were treated to a feast of delectable Lao dishes.

Getting to the gardens is an adventure in its own right. We boarded a long boat in Luang Prabang and journeyed 15-20 minutes down the wide and swirling ochre-red Mekong River passing graceful villas from the French colonial era, the golden spires of Buddhist pagodas and villages where children were splashing in the shallows and fishermen were working on their nets.



Lunch at the Pha Tad Ke café was a feast of delectable Lao dishes.

The mighty Mekong River is born in Tibet and flows through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam on its way to the South China Sea. The longest stretch of the 4350km river is in Laos.

**FACTBOX:**

- *Justine travelled to Laos with Innovative Travel [www.innovativetravel.co.nz](http://www.innovativetravel.co.nz) and Singapore Airlines: [www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)*

Our Innovative Travel team about to board the long boat on the Mekong River.



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