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The dream garden of Laos

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Nothing could be further from the fast-moving world of New York art openings and French photography festivals than this verdant patch of land on the Mekong River in sleepy northern Laos. But Rik Gadella, a Paris-based art and publishing executive, made the transition after a holiday stopover in Luang Prabang in 2007. He had planned to stay just one week, but the charms of the old French colonial town, declared a World Cultural Heritage Site by Unesco in 1995, instantly prompted him to extend his stay to three months.

Nearly seven years later, he is still in Luang Prabang, living in an elegant old villa and bringing to fruition his ambitious project: to design and build a botanical garden. The name, Pha Tad Ke, comes from the adjoining mountain; in Lao it means "the cliff that can untie and resolve problems," he says. "It somehow clicked with the need I felt to change my life," notes Gadella, a youthful-looking 49.

Liberation

His lofty goal is to create a sprawling haven of indigenous plants, herbs and flowers to both educate and inspire visitors while helping the country on both local and national levels. Through research and education programs, he aims to provide local training and employment, boost regional tourism and help address what he calls "critical environmental issues, from managing local natural resources to conserving biodiversity."



Among the species that will feature in the orchid house of Pha Tad Ke are *bulbophyllum ambrosia*, otherwise known as the "fragrant bulbophyllum" because of the flower's strong smell, above, and *dendrobium unicum*, known as the "unique dendrobium," a colorful miniature orchid, found on rocks and under bushes.

Given the proliferation of indigenous plants and flowers -- some endangered -- in the vast forests of Laos, Gadella hopes his team can provide valuable research for academic institutions. Less than 30% of the country's flora has been properly recorded, he says. Already, the garden has formed partnerships with local institutions such as National University of Laos, and collaborative ties with overseas gardens including the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in the U.K., Queen Sirikit Botanic Garden in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

After five years of hard work, recruiting local staff, organizing training, raising finance ("though never enough," he quips) and directing research missions, the dream is fast becoming a reality, with the opening scheduled within 2017.

For Gadella, the journey -- only partially completed -- has been transformational. Born in the Caribbean to Dutch parents and raised in Europe, Gadella had never been to Laos. Nor had he thought of becoming involved in botany, or even gardening. Instead, after studying philosophy in the Netherlands, he established Picaron Editions, an Amsterdam publishing house devoted to works of philosophy, poetry and art.

After moving to Paris, he founded and directed a series of high-profile art fairs, including Paris Photo, a leading annual photography fair, ArtistBook International, and Parcours des Mondes, the annual tribal art show.

His moment of "liberation" came when he sold his company and decided to travel the world. Southeast Asia loomed as an exotic and distant location, and Laos, a long-closed country opening up, seemed appealing.

"When I stopped in Luang Prabang on my travels, I instantly decided to stay on. I had a nice pile of books with me, and I wanted to find a small piece of land where I could build a bamboo hut," he recalls. A local family offered to lease a large property on the Mekong a 15-minute boat ride from town. The overgrown, hilly land once belonged to the Lao royal family, who were deposed in the Communist takeover of 1975.

"I guess I was ready for a big change, and I started thinking, what could I usefully do with all this land? How could I combine sustainable tourism development with biodiversity conservation?"

Despite his lack of a green thumb, Gadella had a deep appreciation of nature and was struck by the region's natural beauty. "I could see how tourism was taking off in the town, hotels were springing up and visitors were streaming in, yet, nobody was really offering interesting new ideas -- and the garden concept just came to me." The task was monumental -- to convert 14 hectares of scrubland into a pristine garden, install irrigation and build facilities including a museum, herbal treatment center and eventually a hotel.



Dr. Leigh Morris, head of education programs at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, offers training for staff at Pha Tad Ke.



Rik Gadella, who owns and is building Pha Tad Ke botanical garden in Laos, sits in the garden with his dog, Milo.

He launched the project with proceeds of the sale of his company. When that ran out, he managed to raise some grants for educational activities and research. But in a communist country with an underdeveloped banking system, he quickly realized the difficulties in financing what he calls the "more mundane parts of the budget" -- vital yet costly aspects such as infrastructure, water systems and construction. There are also monthly wages for a local staff of more than 30 people, who work on research, construction and horticulture. "They have become like family," he said.



Visitors look at works from local artist Tcheu Siong at Project Space Art Gallery in Luang Prabang.

With his dream to bring together tourism, education, community assistance and academic research, Gadella sees the project as a near-perfect combination of philanthropic, development, business and capacity building.

But one thing missing was the art world, the former focus of his life. A chance meeting with another traveler who had pitched up in Luang Prabang, Swiss architect and designer Jean-Pierre Dovat, led to the establishment of Project Space, the town's first contemporary art gallery. Gadella's art and publishing experience fit well with Dovat's talents in design and his plan to specialize in local contemporary and traditional arts and crafts. The two now cooperate on art and garden events. Says Gadella: "It's a great working relationship. I help out at the gallery, and he helps when I need to think about architectural work and design issues."

With the same drive that led to earlier successes, Gadella has added other dimensions to his project, with plans to build an on-site luxury boutique hotel and a medicinal sauna and herbal treatment center. Amid growing tourism interest in Laos, "all we need are the right partners," he says.

Ultimate collection

There are other compelling missions, including establishing a conservation program to help botanists with research projects. The program, the first of its kind in Laos, aims to create specialized collections of native plants and herbs, to record and preserve their related customs and associated uses, from medicinal to ceremonial. The ultimate goal is to catalogue and reintroduce native wild plants into the natural environment.

The ambitious scheme would feature a 4,000-sq.-meter medicinal plant garden, orchid house, herbarium and ethno-botanic garden. The herbarium project alone would include more than 10,000 indigenous plant specimens, each requiring detailed descriptions.

"Laos has so many medicinal plants, and their uses to treat ailments -- once the province of minority groups living in the mountains and of monks -- remain little known," he says.

A base collection of around 400 medicinal plants is to be displayed in a museum located in one of two traditional Lao wooden houses. The other building will be an art and printmaking studio for botanical drawings and artist residencies. Thanks to his discovery of artistic talent among his staff, he has already produced five beautifully illustrated books on local flora.

Local involvement is crucial to the success of Pha Tad Ke, Gadella notes. As well as hiring local villagers to work as gardeners, he plans to locally outsource production of medicinal plant remedies for retail in the shop. "All this will enable local people to rediscover the skills of their ancestors, while creating employment and educating new generations about nature," he says.

His ultimate dream, he adds, is to see the garden "run entirely by local staff and (be) financially self-sustainable and independent." Pha Tad Ke, he predicts, will be "an important place for all tourists and local visitors to the region -- a 'must' in anybody's travel plans."