



A view across the Mekong from the entrance to Pha Tad Ke Botanic Garden.

LAO AND BEHOLD

The passionate team behind a new botanic garden in Luang Prabang is shining a spotlight on native plants and authentic recipes, and helping to preserve a precious aspect of Lao heritage along the way.

BY CLAIRE KNOX

Draped in 40 hectares of thick tropical jungle and laced with limestone cliffs, a misty mountain beside the wide Mekong River in northern Laos might seem an improbable setting for one of Asia's newest and most ambitious botanic gardens. But for Rik Gadella, a high-flying publishing exec turned green thumb who'd once organized illustrious art and photo fairs in New York and Paris, the location made perfect sense.

The Dutchman first visited Luang Prabang a decade ago on what he calls a "midlife crisis" soul-searching pilgrimage across Asia. He was instantly bewitched by the UNESCO-listed town's slow pace and charming architecture.

"This land once belonged to the royal family—it was a hunting estate," Gadella tells me not long after I meet him at the base of the mountain. The spot now heralds the entrance to Pha Tad Ke Botanic Garden, a first of its kind in Laos, which he founded in 2008 and officially opened last November. "The name itself means 'the cliff that can untie and resolve problems.' I had this idea of living in a bamboo hut on the river somewhere in Luang Prabang, but when the landowners approached me and the name was translated, I thought it was a



very good sign. So, instead of buying a Porsche, I bought a jungle.”

The botanic garden didn't just resolve Gadella's own existential quandary, though. As it began to take shape, he unraveled a “much bigger mission”—to address the future of Laos biodiversity and to preserve the native flora that has been entwined with the livelihoods of indigenous communities for centuries.

Over the last eight years, 14 hectares of the grounds have been carefully landscaped into 10 different gardens, from orchid nurseries and ethnobotanical plots with over 1,500 native plants, to a huge arboretum, stands of bamboo and palm, and rice fields. Medicinal and poisonous plants are showcased; so too are bamboo shoots and pepperwood (commonly used in northern Laos cuisine) and the rather vicious, spiky rattan shrubs many hill tribes weave into exquisite textiles and furniture.

Visitors to Pha Tad Ke embark from a pier on the southern fringes of the Luang Prabang peninsula, and the 15-minute boat ride down the Mekong takes in scenery that's almost as splendid as the garden itself: handsome French colonial villas, gilded pagodas peeking out through palms and flowering flamboyant trees, rippling rice paddies, and lively fishing villages are just some of the sights along the way.

Gadella's original plan was to build a swish eco-resort on the two hectares of prime riverfront that came with the property. However, the idea for the botanic garden started to grow after he realized that despite its lush, striking landscape, Laos was developing at a rapid rate and the modernization of its various ethnic groups (anthropologists estimate there are some 55 different minorities in Laos) was putting their deep knowledge of ethnobotany and medicinal plants at risk. “In Thailand, you find a lot of regard for ethnic botany and traditional medicine, even in urban areas,” he says. “But in Laos this heritage is in danger. This country relies more on oral tradition and a lot of the old shamans are dying out. That's why it is so important to document it now.”

Over the next nine years, Gadella traveled the world's most revered botanical gardens, from Kew and Edinburgh to Singapore, and began to recruit from Vientiane's agriculture college, sending his new team on education trips to the Singapore Botanic Gardens and Queen Sirikit Botanic Garden in Chiang Mai. Most of his 50 local staff graduated with college degrees in agriculture—there are no horticulture programs in Laos just yet—but Gadella says all showed a passion for botany from the beginning. “I was most interested in good attitudes and knew we had years to train these guys as the gardens grew.



Now we even have two of our botanists studying their masters on full scholarships in France.” One such passionate student is Khamphart Tongshan, a 25-year-old from a neighboring village who designed the entire site with assistance from visiting botanists. “He started working with us six years ago, studying agriculture on weekends, and is about to head off on a scholarship in the United States. I could tell in his eyes he would be special,” Gadella tells me. “He has such an incredible knowledge of local plants.”

While Pha Tad Ke is set up as a tourist attraction that will ideally keep the project sustainable through a US\$20 entrance fee, more important, according to Gadella, is its role as “a scientific garden for research and education. All that exists in this field in Laos education-wise is forestry and agriculture, so there's a huge gap that needs to be filled.”

As we weave through Pha Tad Ke's kaleidoscopic ginger gardens, the air heavy with the flowers' sweet and slightly spicy perfume, I'm introduced to Somdy Oudomsack, a senior gardener with a wide grin and weathered hands. He tells me we're lucky to be visiting at this time, right in the middle of the monsoon season,

Opposite, from top: Pha Tad Ke founder Rik Gadella is committed to protecting Laos' biodiversity and ethnobotanical heritage; the garden's collection of 1,500 plant species includes striking plots of native palm and bamboo trees.

when the plants are in full, magnificent bloom. “When I started here all of this was covered in dense weeds. It's been a long and huge job, from clearing to designing and building,” he says, adding that another challenge was collecting most of the indigenous plant species. That involved long, challenging trips into remote jungle villages to source seeds and cuttings and gather knowledge from Hmong hill tribe *mò ya* (plant specialists). “This is our first rainy season since opening and to see it looking like this right now gives me a lot of pride,” Oudomsack says, pruning shears slung across his shoulder.

Overseeing the horticulture team is botanist Bryony Smart, a tall, articulate New Zealander who previously worked in London's Kew Gardens. As she guides a group of us on an hour-long tour of Pha Tad Ke, she tells me that the team has recently discovered a number of new species—begonias, gingers, ferns—and were in the process of publishing their findings. She's particularly fond of their wild orchid collection. Of the estimated 485 different orchid species native to Laos, Pha Tad Ke harbors 288.

While urban migration and the Laos government's development plans—a spate of hydro-

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electric dams along the Mekong are under construction, as is a mammoth high-speed train line—are changing the ways that locals live off the land, Smart believes Laotians are still more connected to their plants than most other cultures. “There’s not that much access to modern medicine here and not much infiltration of Western food ideas and products. Because of that, people are still using traditional plants as they would have a century ago, and there is still so much knowledge floating around. I think in the West we’ve culturally lost an awareness that even all of our pharmaceuticals are chemicals derived from plant compounds.”

In July, Pha Tad Ke opened its newest plot, an organic garden bursting with vegetables, rice paddies, and herbs designed to sustain the on-site restaurant’s small but delicious menu of northern Lao dishes. As I chat to Gadella, resident chef and cookbook author Nuanchan Rattanasouvannapon brings us a pitcher of iced bael fruit tea and a smorgasbord of colorful, refined lunch dishes. There’s a delicate Laotian ragout with sweet pumpkin and cubes of beef so tender they fall off the fork; steamed skewers of minced pork, lemongrass, and dill that are wrapped in bamboo shoots and grilled over coals; and a heady tomato-and-pork *jaew* (chili dip) served with sticky-rice crackers, raw vegetables, and the pink, edible petals of one of the garden’s torch

Above, from left: Pha Tad Ke café’s head chef Nuanchan Rattanasouvannapon with one of her modern spins on northern Laos cuisine, a delicate yet flavor-packed ragout with sweet pumpkin and beef; another dish on the menu is minced pork grilled on lemongrass skewers.

gingers. “Traditional Lao ingredients are sourced from the forest,” Nuanchan explains. “You won’t find our recipes in most other Luang Prabang restaurants.”

Although Gadella doesn’t disclose how much he has invested in the project thus far, he tells me his goal is to raise a further US\$4 million to build an education facility with an accredited research center and set up an herbarium for dry plant specimens. He is also seeking US\$200,000 in funding for a permaculture demonstration farm. “It’s such a fashionable word, I know, but it could make such a difference here if we could show local farmers about efficiency. We’d be able to teach and train about layout, recycling, watershed management, and so on. Some organizations come into Laos with great intentions and build demonstration farms, but as soon as they leave the country the projects can fall flat. At Pha Tad Ke, we are in between public and private so we can have a deeper impact. We could have a central training facility here for them to use, and generate extra income to fund the courses for local farmers by running two-day courses for tourists. What those tourists would pay could fund five local farmers to get the same training. What could be more worthwhile than that?” ●

For more about the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden, visit pha-tad-ke.com.