



GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL IN LUANG PRABANG

story by Vincent Vichit-Vadakan

Once only a destination for adventurous backpackers traveling on the cheap, today the UNESCO World Heritage site boasts plush resorts, fine restaurants and bespoke tours for visitors looking for a change of pace.

Life in Luang Prabang is unhurried, much like the daily procession of saffron-robed monks who solemnly collect alms in the morning mist. It may be a sleepy little town, but you'll never be at a loss for things to do.





Amantaka

WHERE TO STAY (AND BE PAMPERED)

These hotels go to great lengths to offer personal service and creature comforts like world-class spa facilities.

Stepping into the lush gardens of the **Sofitel Luang Prabang** (sofitel-luangprabang.com), once the French governor's residence, is like entering an oasis of peace and calm. Thoughtful touches include scented baths that can be drawn on request in the private outdoor Garden Suite tubs. The spa is located in a beautifully-appointed teak house on stilts. The **Luang Say Residence** (luangsayresidence.com) captures the essence of 19th-century service and style. Sip an aperitif in the antique woodwork of the 1861 Bar and imagine you're hobnobbing with the likes of Henri Mouhot, the discoverer of Angkor Wat. Just one of the French explorers of Indochina whose whimsical statues decorate the grounds.

The stately rooms of **Amantaka** (aman.com/resorts/amantaka) are a seamless blend of sleek grandeur and traditional style. Curl up with a book in the airy library, enjoy a dip in your private pool or discover watsu, floating shiatsu performed by trained therapists in the exclusive spa. Staying at **Satri House** (satrihouse.com) really feels like coming home. Many of the carefully chosen artworks and objects in the comfortably cosy rooms and around the hotel are available for purchase. On site, you can enjoy an Indochine massage followed by an herbal steam bath. **Azerai Luang Prabang** (azerai.com/luang-prabang), the new kid on the block, also sports a relaxing, modern spa retreat. Light wood-paneled treatment rooms and attentive therapists make this a perfect stop to stretch out for a Lao massage after a day of sightseeing.

WHERE TO EAT

Local food in Luang Prabang is vibrant and fresh, with dozens of indigenous, untranslatable herbs, stews seasoned with distinctive pepper wood bark and sheets of *khaipen*, a sort of fresh water nori encrusted with sesame seeds or dried tomatoes for dipping in *jeow*, thick chili pastes that play the same role as sambal.

One of the best-kept secrets in the heart of the world heritage site is the **Princess Restaurant** in Villa Santi (villasantihotel.com), a former residence of the wife of King Sisavangvong. In the upstairs dining room that was once the royal bedroom, Lao specialties are served from shared trays called *pha khao* like they were in the palace and as they still are presented in homes today. Don't miss the *lan som*, a simmered curry enriched with Mekong river fish roe. The most talked-about chef in town

is newcomer Ben Faker at **Azerai Bistro** (azerai.com/luang-prabang). The talented young Brit who spent part of his childhood in Hong Kong before cooking in the UK and Australia serves up bright, innovative flavors that embrace Lao ingredients in winning combinations like peppery watercress, seasonal fruit and local artisanal cheese in a refreshing salad, tangy pickled local squash paired with a *terraine en gelée* and fried Mekong catfish with jungle greens. The brand new **Calao** is located in the century-old residence of a Chinese merchant that overlooks the Mekong. Yannick Upravan shares his family recipes with the same attention to taste and detail that he and partner Gilles Vautrin bring to the French cuisine they have served at **L'éléphant** (elephant-restau.com), a perennial favorite, for the past 17 years.



Princess Restaurant Villa Santi



Luang Say residence



Luang Say residence

WHAT TO DO

Luang Prabang may be laid back, but there is no risk of getting bored. Temple visits, sunset cruises and climbing waterfalls are all popular activities, but there is lots more on offer.

Mandalao (mandalaotours.com) is an elephant sanctuary with a difference: the elephants' welfare is at the heart of the center, and private tours include washing and feeding the elephants, and walking with them through rivers and rice paddies with passionate guides. Learn first hand what back-breaking, eye-straining work silk weaving is at **Ock Pok Tok's Heritage Craft Center** (ockpoptok.com) or simply go on the very informative free tour. The **Pha Tad Ke Botanical Gardens** (pha-tad-ke.com) will arrange private tours of the decorative, edible and medicinal plants with a knowledgeable botanist. The gardens are also a peaceful setting for a *baci* ceremony, a Lao tradition that anchors the body's 32

souls with a blessing that is symbolized by the tying of strings around your wrist. Every night, visitors gather at **Garavek** (garavek.com) to hear how Mount Phousi came to be located outside the royal palace and be entertained by the antics of Xieng Mieng, the clever prankster Lao children grow up with. An engaging storyteller shares the legends in English, accompanied by a musician playing the *khene*, a traditional flute. Foodies can join **Amantaka's** bespoke market tour and cooking lesson from the hotel's head chef Charly Gomes and his staff or join **Tamarind's** lively cooking class in the jungle.

"Can you name another place that has an international airport and no traffic lights?" boasted a proud local, summing up the paradox and charm of what was once the capital of Lan Xang, the Kingdom of a Million Elephants. The question was of course rhetorical. The gentle enchantment of Luang Prabang doesn't require any explanations. 🐘



Ock Pok Tok



Mandolo

WHERE TO SHOP

You won't find big brands and shopping malls in Luang Prabang and with any luck it will stay that way. But that doesn't mean you need to go home empty-handed.

Anakha (anakhalifestyle.com) sells original ladies' and men's clothes cut from fine linen and silk blends sourced in Vietnam; their handbags and wallets are produced by a craftsman who also supplies Hermès. Fine antiques and rare textiles from Laos and around Asia are meticulously curated at **Asiama** (asiama.fr) by Alain Ménoni and Dr. Linda McIntosh, who will be delighted to share stories about the items in the gallery. **Naga Creations** (Sisavangvong Road, +85671212775) features beautifully

wearable one-of-a-kind jewelry in gold or silver and precious stones including opals, tourmaline and aquamarine as well as original designs inspired by traditional Lao arts. **Indigo Fabrics** (King Kitsarath Road, +856 20 55724930), the labor of love of young brothers Somneuk and Nat, is a tribute to the people who weave the cotton, silk and hemp, including those from their native Nambak, three hours from the city.

Find spices, pepper wood, dried bamboo and wild mushroom chips for snacking and other food gifts at the **Morning Market** (Ban Pakham next to Wat Mai, best before 9 am) located directly behind the National Museum.