

TURNING TIDES

Where the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers merge, you have the Laos city of Luang Prabang, blending culinary influences and muddling nature with modernity in the most spectacular way

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Clockwise, from above left: two rivers are integral to city life; preparing *kaipen*; frogs at the market; local steamers; ornate Wat Xieng Thong; sunset over the Mekong





The jungle doesn't so much surround the city of Luang Prabang as hug it, sending its slender green arms – well watered by two rivers – through its streets and alleys, giving it the feel of a place very much at one with nature.

Rising through this most lush of cityscapes are the red-tiled rooftops and the curved peaks of some of this Unesco-protected wonder's 33 gilded wats. With a backdrop of richly forested mountains and the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers meandering through the green, it's almost the perfect vision of rewilding, the encouragement of the natural world to blend with modern life.

Laos' fourth-biggest city lies on the peninsula where the two rivers meet, and at ground level you can clearly see the footprint of the people that have walked here before. The French left a bigger mark than most, despite departing more than 70 years ago, with their former mansions, schools and palaces, many of them delicately enveloped by the tentacles of the southeast Asian jungle, taking you back to an earlier time.

But impressive as their legacy is, it's not the Europeans that made the biggest statement of intent – that was the Buddhists, with their myriad temples dressed in ochre, white and gold, most of which were standing long before the French arrived, and some for more than 500 years.

While thrill-seekers might head to the capital Vientiane for full-moon parties with all the frivolity and noise of modern travel, Luang Prabang is where you go to soak up the history, the natural world and the blended cuisine of a place where wine bars sit side by side with noodle stalls. Food and drink is always sampled with a view – in every direction mountains and forests block vistas of still more mountains and forests. Villages carve out an existence and rivers wind between the trees and slopes. Laos is a tropical green landscape where farmers do battle to push back the jungle.

In the cool of the morning air, a pocket of Luang Prabang's Old Town turns into a wet market. The streets next to the former palace are closed to traffic and filled with produce, stalls and carefully harvested favourites from the jungle. Why farm food when the forests are already doing the work? You find wild mushrooms, fern fronds, flower petals and a variety of herbaceous leaves to add aromatic depth to salads and soups. There's a strong trade for the timber of pepper wood trees, which imbue a spicy yet numbing tone when slow-cooked in stews.

The jungle provides protein as well.

WHERE TO STAY

Angsana Maison-Souvannaphoum Expect a colonial vibe with a modern tilt, with beautiful grounds and a modest pool within reach of bar service. It's a short walk to the Night Market to the east, and Phousi Market to the west. Doubles from £110. *Chao Fa Ngum Road, Ban Mano, 00 856 71 254609, angsana.com*

Burasari Heritage Very personal service paired with colonial styling on a quiet corner of the Old Town. Just a handful of rooms, with breezy common areas – and you're a stone's throw from the monks at Wat Xieng Thong and the excellent pastries at Le Banneton. Doubles from £90. *Kingkitsarath Road, Old Town. 00 856 71 255031, burasariheritage.com*

La Résidence Phou Vao One of the Belmond Hotels, La Résidence offers an element of seclusion just outside of the main town. Suites hug the hillside, leaning heavily into Laos' colonial past and gilded with temple views and more than a hint of jungle beyond. Doubles from £165. *Phouvao Road, 00 856 71 212530, belmond.com*

Sofitel Luang Prabang Serene and spacious, the former governor's residence is an oasis of calm nestled within the residential suburb of Ban Mano, not far from the Old Town. The generous-sized pool appeals to those who don't care for a swim in the Mekong. Doubles from £208. *Mano Mai, Ban Mano, 00 856 71 260777, sofitel-luangprabang.com*



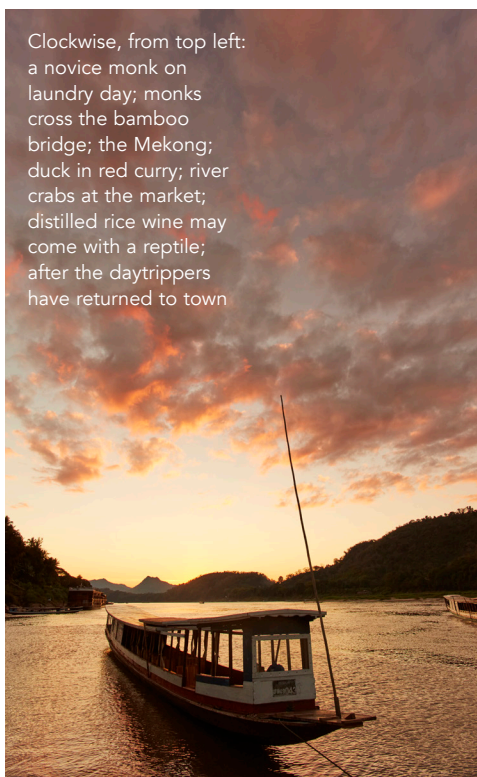
Wasp eggs are collected from forest trees, matured just enough to offer a buttery texture when squeezed. Small bats, big beetles and insect larvae are frequently on sale and change with the seasons. Fish are netted from the rivers while frogs are harvested from rice fields by emptying one paddy at a time. River crabs are bundled up with bamboo strips and sold for less than £2 a dozen.

The smaller rivers that feed the Mekong are ideal for the annual harvest of river algae, which is collected, washed and dried in the

sun. Shallots, tomatoes and sesame seeds are added, then the algae (also called river weed) is dried into sheets and deep-fried for good measure. The result is *kaipen*, a tasty side dish with maximum crunch and minimal food miles. £1 buys you a large bagful at the market, or a few sheets when sitting down for lunch at a restaurant.

A few stalls within the market serve hot breakfast, invariably with rice. Among the residential backstreets you'll

Clockwise, from top left: a novice monk on laundry day; monks cross the bamboo bridge; the Mekong; duck in red curry; river crabs at the market; distilled rice wine may come with a reptile; after the daytrippers have returned to town





Clockwise, from top left: Tad Sae Waterfalls; grains at the Morning Market; a local aubergine variety; a cookery school teacher; sticky rice; Morning Market stalls;

backstreet eats in the Old Town; banana flower salad with mint; banana flowers at the market; a farmer harvests watercress; sorting rice from the husks

WHERE TO EAT

525 Chilled cocktail and tapas bar on the quiet side of town, an easy walk from the Sofitel hotel. Englishman Andrew Sykes started this den of chic and does great things with lemongrass and vodka. There's enough Laos style on the cocktail menu to delight, plus a very local twist on tapas. Cocktails from £8. *Kingkitsarath Road, 00 856 20 7713 0130, 525cocktails.com*

Dyen Sabai Cradling the banks of the Nam Khan, a cluster of bamboo huts cling to the slope and overlook the river. It's a great atmosphere from which to enjoy Laos cooking or barbecue at the table, but as you have to cross the bamboo bridge when heading back over to the Old Town, it might be an idea to go a little easy on the cocktails. Barbecue grill with *jeow* and a cocktail from £12. *Ban Phan Louang, 00 856 71 410185*

Icon Klub Small wine bar with plenty of personality and a smattering of poetry that is very popular with hospitality staff when their shifts are over. Hungarian owner Elizabeth Vongsaravanh is the life of the party, in charge of

mixing the drinks and the crowds. Cocktails from £4. *Sakkaline Road near the bamboo bridge, Old Town, 00 856 71 254905, iconklub.com*

Le Banneton Excellent bread baked daily on site, plus a good range of coffee, teas and pastries. Service can be slow because it's seriously popular with travellers who want a break from sticky rice. The baguettes are perfection but the apple tarts are a slice of heaven. Coffee with a pastry and baguette from £3. *03/46 Sakkaline Road, Old Town, 00 856 30 578 8340*

Le Calao One of several offerings from Yannick Upravan and Gilles Vautrin offering a colonial setting that embraces both French and Laos cuisines. Popular hangout for local expats who want strong Laos flavours, attentive service and a generous wine list. Six-course Laos menu from £15. *98 Khem Kong Road, 00 856 71 212100, calao-restau.com*

Manda de Laos A colourful setting, nestled around a lily pond and decorated with fairy lights. The menu is the hero, though, with all the intensity of Laos

cuisine delivered alongside excellent cocktails. Their barbecue dishes deliver on the smoky notes and spicy sauces don't hold back. Main, dessert and a cocktail from £25. *10 Norrassan Road, 00 856 71 253 923, mandadelaos.com*

Night Market Barbecue vendors, shake stands and crepe stalls pack into the laneways surrounding the main street of the Old Town. Cheap and cheerful, but with plenty of Laos flavour on offer. Large plate of noodles and vegetables from £1. *Corner of Kingkitsalat and Sisavangvong Roads*

Tamarind One of the most reliable Laos menus in town but also very popular, so make sure to book ahead (if you can't get a table, you could try an evening class at their cooking school instead). Great selection of *jeow*, and the *mock pa* fish dish is one of the best in town. Finish with an alcohol-free enticement such as iced *bael* fruit tea, pineapple and ginger or watermelon chilli granita. *Mock pa* and roselle granita from £10. *Kingkitsarath Road, 00 856 71 213128, tamarindlaos.com*

also find plenty of *khao soi* stalls – as long as you get there before the pot is empty, when they close up shop. This Laos twist on pho consists of rice noodles in broth served with greens and topped with a rich pork sauce. The intense flavours come from fermenting soy beans and cooking through with minced pork and tomato, and a little goes a very long way. An alternative dish is *khao poon*, which uses a combination of coconut and red curry paste instead of clear broth, and pressed noodles prepared from rice grains that have been fermented for days and then ground into a paste, with lemongrass, lime and galangal as the flavour base.

By 10am the morning market stalls start to wind down and the sun starts to break through the mist. Visitors tend to come here during the late winter months when things are a little drier and cooler, and misty mornings are typical. →

Clockwise, from top left: fish fresh from the river are barbecued; a fisherman casts his net; one of many ornate, gilded temples; puddle sipping in the village of Nong Khiaw; a plate of *nem khao*; in the heart of Old Town



One of the charms of this town is an absence of beaches and nightclubs. There's a handful of wine bars, like Icon Klub in the Old Town, and cocktail bars such as 525 not far from the Sofitel hotel, which are regular haunts for expats and travellers looking for quality drinks. The Sofitel Luang Prabang is tucked away in a neighbourhood half-way between the Old Town and Phousi Market, where restaurants shop for produce. This isn't your usual chain hotel, being the former governor's residence, protected by Unesco listing, and it's an exceptional hideaway for those seeking privacy, its original buildings complemented with elegant villas that embrace modern comforts. Step outside the gates in the morning and a short walk in almost any direction will take you to breakfast. As well as stalls selling khao soi noodles, you'll find *nem khao*, freshly steamed rice sheets wrapped around diced wood-mushrooms and minced pork, served with fried shallots and plenty of *jeow som* (a mix of fish sauce and lime similar to Vietnamese *nuoc cham*).

Staying at upmarket hotels away from town requires a shuttle to get to the temples – or take one of their bikes for a slow pedal along the river. If you make it all the way down to the magnificent Wat Xieng Thong at the end of the peninsula, you can stop by 3 Nagas, which, like Sofitel, is part of the Accor group. One phone call and a shuttle will collect you and the bikes while you sip on a soda and lime.

The Old Town is full of smaller accommodation options. One stand-out is Burasari Heritage, owned by a Thai family with a penchant for quirky yet elegant style. Dark teak and heavy linen accents lean into the colonial vibe, and guests take breakfast under the shade of banana palms while watching the Nam Khan flowing past – baguettes and jam for continental palates, khao soi and extra chilli for the local option.

On the same block, French bakery Le Banneton offers a momentary side trip to Paris – try the *tarte aux pommes*. Other notable French influences come from Yannick Upravan and Gilles Vautrin, who've been a constant presence here for two decades and own Le Calao. →

DON'T MISS

Backstreet Academy A useful way to connect with knowledgeable local guides in Luang Prabang and an opportunity to head down the path less travelled. Food tours vary from those focused on making rice wine to catching crabs in the Nam Khan. From £10pp. 00 62 822 4383 4885, backstreetacademy.com

Cooking classes Start the day with a guided tour of the markets before preparing your own Laos-style dishes. Several restaurants offer cooking experiences and you can even learn how to make your own *jeow som*, inclusive of pounding and pressing. Or book a class at Tamarind Cooking School, set in a neighbourhood far from the busy streets of the old town. From £20pp. 00 856 71 213128, tamarindlaos.com

Elephant Village These days, riding elephants is discouraged in Laos and is widely being phased out. Instead, you can spend time with these majestic creatures responsibly and help contribute to their welfare. Elephant Camp close to Luang Prabang provides a good home and rehabilitation to unwanted animals.

Waterfalls Head near the colourful Kuangsi and Tad Sae Waterfalls, with tour packages typically combining the two. Half-day visit including lunch and entrance to the waterfalls, from £36pp. elephantvillage-laos.com

Ma Te Sai A great shop for quality Laos textiles that also organises overnight trips to Nong Khiaw to meet and share a meal with the weavers. A member of Fair Trade Laos, Ma Te Sai helps villagers sell their work at a sustainable price. Two-day trip, from £100pp. 00 856 71 260654, matesai.com

Pak Ou Caves A day on the river in the company of a grumpy boatman is essential to the Luang Prabang experience. They'll stop at villages along the way to sell you cheap souvenirs and local rice wine. The caves themselves are modest but serene, filled with carvings of Buddha. Haggle for a price at the main pier, or pay a little more for a nicer boat and fixed-price itinerary. Half-day trip for two with hotel transfers, cave entrance and on-boat drinks and snacks from £66. 00 856 20 5626 0620, bananaboatlaos.com





Above: view from the bridge in the village of Nong Khiaw, north of the city, where you can meet the weavers making traditional Laotian textiles

FOOD GLOSSARY

- Jeow khing** Dip made from ground pork skin, ginger paste and peanuts
- Jeow mak keus** Smoky aubergine dip made from softening the vegetable over hot coals and mixing with herbs and fish sauce
- Jeow som** Light sauce made from fish sauce, lime and chilli
- Khao chii** Sticky rice rolled into a patty and grilled over coals
- Khao poon** Fermented rice noodles served in a coconut curry soup
- Khao soi** Rice noodle soup similar to pho but usually made with minced pork and herbaceous greens
- Kaipen** River weed (algae) seasoned with shallots and deep fried
- Laab** Salad made from chopped vegetables, often with minced chicken or pork
- Mok pa** River fish steamed in a banana leaf with herbs and galangal
- Nam khao** Crispy rice salad with pork, peanuts and Laos sausage
- Nem khao** Steamed rice sheets rolled with mushrooms and pork
- Orlam** Slow-cooked stew flavoured with lemongrass and spicy pepper wood, thickened with ground sticky rice
- Sai kok** Spicy grilled pork sausage made from pork, lemongrass, lime leaves and chilli

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: breakfast noodles with diced pork; limes, herbs and banana flowers; harvesting rice; fresh roselle (hibiscus); novices finish class; chillies dry in the sun; a backstreet filled with vendors; dried roselle, used for iced tea; a bowl of duck curry

They offer a choice of French and Laotian menus – an excellent selection of *jeow* (Laos-style dips), barbecue and noodle dishes, for example, can be sampled alongside a grand *cru* from Saint-Émilien. Laotian cooking only really makes sense if you have a big basket of freshly steamed sticky rice to eat it with. Servings of juicy *jeow* with fish sauce, or mushrooms and herbs steamed in a banana leaf, are typically modest, but with intense flavours. A small ball of sticky rice soaks up those punchy sour flavours and turns it into a meal. Rice is abundant but leftovers are never wasted – they're simply made into patties and grilled over coals for breakfast.

Sticky rice is also the currency when showing care for monks. Every morning before dawn monks gather outside their Old Town temples to form a line and walk through the streets collecting alms. It's a humbling ritual that reinforces the dependence monks have on community generosity. Locals call this *tak bak*, and residents dress respectfully to offer every monk a small handful of sticky rice as they silently walk past. By the end of their route each bowl of alms is nearly full, and perhaps includes the odd piece of fruit.

Monks can cross to Nam Khan on the opposite river bank via a wobbly bamboo bridge, and as this gets washed away at least once a year by high water, everyone else is charged a token fee to cross and return, to fund the inevitable reconstruction. Nam Khan is lovely, quiet and has just a handful of eateries.

But it's the busy Mekong that makes Luang Prabang what it is today. Boats connect from all over the country, moving up and down the river like a free-flowing highway. During the day, many river boats arrive from villages further up stream, and boatmen tout to take tourists out to Pak Ou, the site of 'the cave of a thousand Buddhas', which is how Buddhists say 'too' →



many to count'. The trip makes for a great day on the water, often providing respite from the humidity. The homeward leg is the best part, with the sun turning golden behind a hazy horizon and a cooling breeze is felt from the movement of the boat. Small restaurants line the river, selling the refreshing local Beerlao pilsner along with ice-cold fruit.

After dark, the city's main street closes to traffic and opens to vendors. Cheap eats at the Night Market see plates piled high for under £1 – grilled meats cost a little extra but are popular, as smoke fills the night sky and whole ducks spin on home-rigged rotisseries. Tropical fruits blended into ice shakes do a brisk trade. Souvenirs and textiles are also sold en masse, many of the fabrics hand made.

Those wishing to get closer to the craftspeople should head to a quiet corner of the Old Town, where a modest shop called Ma Té Sai, run by Australian Emi Weir, takes travellers on an intimate journey with Laotian textiles. The store stocks plenty of fine examples, but Emi also organises day trips into the mountains to meet the makers in the village of Nong Khiaw. The road passes a lot of rice fields, a lot of kaipen drying in the sun and a lot of jungle.

The area is rich in a variety of ethnic groups, but the weaving villages Ma Té Sai work with are mostly the matriarchal Tai Lue minority. They grow cotton in their backyards, thread it on to spools in the shade of their houses, colour with natural dyes like flowers and bark, then weave by hand using traditional wooden looms. A side benefit is sharing lunch with them, sitting down on low stools in front of a table filled with dishes that the young girls

of the family have been preparing all morning. If you're lucky they may have killed a duck that day, and cooked down the bones to make a broth that is topped with blossoming greens that grow on the edge of the forest. A good meal might include a salad of herbs and minced chicken (*laab gai*), jeow made from chargrilled buffalo skin and chillies, wild mushrooms braised with ginger and tamarind, and homemade kaipen. And, of course, there is the ubiquitous sticky rice. Everything on the table is sourced within walking distance and delivers on those trademark astringent and aromatic notes Lao people love. Given the chance, you will too. □

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Currency is the Lao kip (LAK) but US dollars are widely used. Time is seven hours ahead of GMT. Flight time from London is around 14 hours. The Laos government officially opens up to 'post-pandemic' tourism in April.

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways offers flights from London Heathrow, via Bangkok, to Wattay International Airport in the capital, Vientiane. thaiairways.com

Vietnam Airlines flies regularly from Heathrow to Vientiane with a layover in Hanoi, Vietnam. vietnamairlines.com

RESOURCES

Laos Tourism is the official tourist board and its website offers plenty of sightseeing inspiration and handy tips. laotourism.org



'At the Night Market plates are piled high with noodles and vegetables. Grilled meats are

popular and smoke fills the night sky as whole ducks spin on home-rigged rotisseries'

Below, from left: bitter, wild baby gourd are used in soups; rice sacks – the deeper the colour, the more expensive; coconut, rice and pandan wrapped in banana

leaves; peanuts still on the stalk; water scorpions, a premium snack when grilled over hot coals; the elephant sanctuary. Above: boats moored at Pak Ou Caves

