



LUANG PRABANG

– the Jewel on the Mekong

Mick Shippen discovers the charm and beauty of Luang Prabang, a once hidden jewel of Southeast Asia and now one of Laos' most popular destinations.

Few countries conjure up such a sense of mystery and intrigue in the traveller's mind as mountainous landlocked Laos. Regarded as Southeast Asia's sleepy backwater, for many years Laos' communist government ensured the country remained closed to the outside world. Unconcerned by neighbouring Thailand's dash for modernity, Laos resolutely moved at its own pace. When the door was finally eased open for travellers in the early 90s it revealed a beautiful country with a fascinating culture and ethnically diverse population.

An Encrusted Jewel

For travellers, historians and archaeologists alike, Luang Prabang was one of the most startling discoveries; a jewel encrusted ring slipped over a slender finger of land at the confluence of the Mekong and the Nam Khan River. Circled by mountains, the beautiful town retains some of the most outstanding examples of regional architecture, a unique blend of local and European style buildings built by the colonial powers during the 19th and 20th centuries. With its ancient temples and adherence to local traditions, Luang Prabang was soon recognised as the seat of Lao culture. Acknowledging its

importance to mankind the town was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995 and the old town benefited from restoration work.

The World Heritage label has worked for and against Luang Prabang. It is no longer a sleepy Laotian town. The influx of tourists has fuelled development in the old district with every space being filled with replica colonial-era buildings, restaurants and bars, Internet cafes and hotels. More worryingly is the expansion work being carried out at the airport with a soft loan from China which will allow massive Airbus 320s to land in the town by 2013.

Spectacular Views

One of the great attractions of the old town is that it is easy to explore on foot or by bicycle. Rise early and witness *tak bat* with lines of monks resplendent in their orange robes collecting alms from the faithful, and the more recent tradition of even longer lines of tourists photographing the event. Climb the stairs to the top of mount Phu Si, a large hill topped with a temple that dominates the town and breathe in the spectacular view of the town, its golden chedis and glistening temple rooftops.

Luang Prabang has over 30 splendid old temples,



the most magnificent of which is Vat Xieng Thong. The oldest structure in the temple compound dates from the 1560's and features impressive mosaics, elaborate décor and gold stencilled designs. The low sweeping roofs and outstanding craftsmanship set Luang Prabang temples apart from many others across Southeast Asia.

The National Brew

The cuisine of Luang Prabang is distinctive. Rich in vegetables, the soups and curries are a healthy choice for diners. With a display of the tempting, the unfamiliar and the downright gruesome, a trip to the morning market affords a fascinating insight into the culinary complexity of local food. Although the boom in tourism has brought with it a wide choice of restaurants serving international cuisine, visitors would be well advised to sample the local delights.

In the not too distant past Luang Prabang nodded off by nine in the evening, but today with the blossoming of café bars and eateries there is no need to retire early. Clustered around Thanon Sisvongvong and pushed up against the Mekong, Luang Prabang's bars and restaurants offer *al fresco* dining in a pleasantly balmy climate.

Recommended dishes include the delicious *aw laam*, a kind of vegetable stew thickened with broken sticky rice and gently spiced with the addition of pieces of *sakarn* wood. *Sin savan*, thin slices of sun dried beef served with *jeow bong*, a roasted chilled paste and *kaipen*, tasty sheets of dried river weed similar to Japanese *nori* also make the perfect

accompaniment to a chilled Beer Lao while soaking up Mekong views. The ubiquitous Beer Lao is one of the country's biggest exports and best selling products at home. The brew is regarded as one of the finest beers in Southeast Asia. You can't miss it as it has over 95 percent of the local beer market, almost all restaurants have the distinctive yellow and green Beer Lao signs outside, and T-shirts with the logo abound.

The Mother of Rivers

Floundering in the shallows of the Mekong, shoals of teak-hulled boats down from China unload their cargo and await a fresh consignment before continuing on to Thailand. Known in Lao as the *Mae Nam Kong* (literally 'mother river'), the Mekong feeds the nation with a huge variety of freshwater fish. In the cool and dry seasons, its fertile banks and islands are planted with a wide variety of vegetables. The river is still used in Buddhist ceremonies that follow a cremation, carrying the ashes of the deceased to the bottom of its murky waters in a simple earthenware jar and onto the next life.

For visitors, the Mekong is the route to discovering the riches of the Luang Prabang region. Two hours upstream, the Pak Ou caves, two cool limestone chambers are set in a steep cliff face that rises from the waters where the Mekong and the Nam Ou rivers merge. The craggy mountains make for a strenuous climb to see the dozens of Buddha images enshrined here, but is well-worth the effort.

Lethal Hooch

Along the route boats often stop at Ban Xian Hai, a former pot-making village with remnants of ancient kilns, but now a centre for distilling the infamous rice whisky, so popular among locals. Twenty minutes downstream from Luang Prabang is the potter's village of Bahn Chan, the production centre for the jars that hold the lethal hooch.



Access to the tiny settlement is made by a flight of rib-like concrete stairs. The village, a loose assembly of stilted houses secured to a ribbon of waterfront land, makes an interesting excursion.

Ringed by rolling hills, Luang Prabang is a great starting point for adventurous travellers and is the gateway to towns in the far north including Oudomxai, Luang Nam Tha and Muang Sing where opportunities await for trekking with local guides to hill tribe villages.

Laos has well and truly awoken from its slumber. Whether exploring the rich cultural heritage, enjoying a leisurely cruise down the Mekong River or engaging with colourful hill tribes, laidback landlocked Laos never fails to inspire and enchant. **A**

WHERE TO STAY

Luang Prabang has no shortage of small hotels. One of the first boutique hotels in the town was The Apsara, a former rice warehouse situated on the banks of the Nam Khan River and a short walk from the heart of the historic district. Guests enjoy large bedrooms, tasteful décor, friendly service and a delicious breakfast. There's also a river terrace to enjoy river views and cocktails. The Apsara has a sister resort, Apsara Rive Droite, directly opposite on the other side of the river, and accessed by boat. www.theapsara.com

DINING OUT

It's easy for first time visitors to Laos to be intimidated by the cuisine, but it is well worth exploring. A good place to start your culinary adventure is at Tamarind Café, just a few steps from The Apsara. Open for lunch and dinner, this quaint little restaurant offers tasting plates of Lao food and there is also an excellent cooking school. www.tamarindlaos.com

AIR FLIGHTS

Lao Airlines flies return between Singapore and Vientiane Tues, Thurs & Sundays.