

# DISCOVERING A LAID-BACK PACE IN LAOS

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It's not long after 6 a.m. that the orange begins to extricate itself from the darkness, deep shades of saffron revealed through the morning mist as I stare up a narrow, quiet street in Luang Prabang. While the colour matches the most vivid, dramatic hue of daybreak, dawn is still a good forty minutes away; that marvellous orange isn't the sunrise, rather the shade of the robes of young monks, walking barefoot on a soundless march through town.

It's a scene that occurs every morning in this northern Lao town, once the royal and religious capital of Laos. Named for the Pra Bang Buddha, who is believed to have smiled upon this tranquil peninsula flanked by the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers. Luang Prabang's Buddhist roots run back more than 500 years; today of the town centre's 20,000 or so inhabitants, more than 1,000 are monks, many school-age novices who have travelled down from the mountains and countryside to get an education. It's the youngest of these who march in silent procession, metal pots hanging from their shoulders by a woven strap, waiting to be filled with hot sticky rice. This ancient tradition, Tak Bat, is how the monks – with no earthly possessions of their own – amass their daily meal, alms collected from devout locals and tourists alike, as they have done for as long as Buddhism itself has been around. And while Luang Prabang, with its luminous temples and perfectly-preserved colonial buildings peeking out through the dense greenery, perpetually feels like a place untouched by time, that feeling is never more acute than during this mystical morning ritual.

*Stunning view at Phou Si*

Declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995, Luang Prabang benefits from tight regulations to protect its timeless character. There are no tour buses here, no big hotels, and with the exception of its nearly three dozen gold-swathed temples and the former Royal Palace (now a museum), every structure – from public buildings to private homes – must conform to the low-slung, terraced architectural style, constructed from rich local teak, rosewood, ebony and mahogany. “It is not a city at all in the western sense, but a leisurely congregation of dwellings of simple lines,” wrote the American writer Harry Franck when he visited in the 1920s, also calling the town an idealist’s version of Utopia.

The buildings are but one reminder of the confluence between Southeast Asian and French Indochine charm: after the monks retreated back to their temples, pots full,

we crossed the street to Le Banneton, a French bakery café, for a breakfast of flaky croissants, pain au chocolat and café au lait, followed by a walk through the morning market for coconut dumplings, a street snack made from sweet coconut milk and sticky rice, served still steaming from their bite-sized round moulds by old ladies crouching on stools.

One could lose themselves here, I think, wandering the narrow alleys which are transformed into an open-air pop-up market each morning after Tak Bat. There are piles of fresh herbs and colourful tropical fruits brought down from the hills each morning and splayed on bamboo mats and plastic tarps on the sidewalk, oyster mushrooms and green eggplants no bigger than tangerines, river seaweed dried and wound into mossy globes or flattened into nori-like sheets studded with tomato,

garlic, lemongrass and sesame, and still more exotic local delicacies such as snake and roasted gopher, best unseen by the squeamish. Luang Prabang is relatively tiny; you could meander your way across all of downtown by foot in under an hour – so it would be difficult to actually get lost. There’s none of the frantic energy you’d encounter in other Asian food markets, no ducking and weaving required here, and the languid vibe of the place lends itself to daydreams and distraction.

There are two widely believed legends as to how Luang Prabang was discovered. According to one, a pair of hermit brothers stumbled upon the site more than a thousand years ago as they searched the hills of northern Laos for a spiritual retreat. By the other, it was Buddha himself who discovered this verdant, frangipani-scented valley near the foothills of the Luang Prabang mountain



*Morning market*



*Royal palace temple*



*Phou Si Buddha*



*Tak Bat ceremony*

range. Historians date the town back to the sixth century, though it was several hundred more years before it became the powerful capital of Lan Xang, the Kingdom of a Million Elephants, whose power reached down across much of Cambodia and up to the Chinese border.

Many of Luang Prabang's most exquisite sites date that far back. At the northernmost tip of the peninsula, where the Mekong and Nam Khan meet, sits Wat Xieng Thong, Temple of the Golden City, with its three-tiered roof and intricate carvings covered in gold leaf, considered one of the most outstanding examples of intact Lao temple architecture. It sits in a wide, open plaza, surrounded by flowering gardens and nearly two dozen more shrines and pavilions. On the rear exterior wall of the temple, a stunningly complex mosaic made from Japanese glass depicts either the tree of life or the flame tree the hermit brothers are storied to have found in this very spot, depending on who you ask.

All this is lovely, but the magic is that it somehow feels yours alone. When I walked up to Wat Xieng Thong late one afternoon, there was but one pair of shoes outside the temple belonging to the only other visitor. Inside, amongst

the ancient statues and incense smoke I found the kind of deep, enchanting silence that's so often sacrificed to jostling tourists. There are some 31 other temples scattered through town, including Wat Mai Suwannapumaram, a spectacularly ornate temple which backs onto the night market. From here, the chanting of dozens of monks later provided ethereal audio as I browsed hand-etched ebony elephants, locally made pottery, silk scarves and hand-printed motifs of the tree from Wat Xieng Thong, printed on pulpy artisanal paper made in a nearby village from mulberry bark.

Even more dreamlike is to take it all in from high above. Rising above the centre of town is Mt. Phou Si, with golden Wat Chom Si shimmering at its summit. Some 100 metres high, it was the only landmark I could see through the trees from the wooden deck of my hotel room across town. It's 328 steps to the peak along a winding path shaded by Banyan trees (it's a sweatier hike than you'd expect because of the humidity), and flanked, along the back side, by golden buddhas in all shapes and sizes. Halfway up, a handful of monks, none of whom looks older than 18, rest on the edge of the wooden platform of the new temple they're building; a few metres above that another young monk

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stops his reading to talk to me, looking to practice his already impressive English.

The view from the peak is worth the climb, stretching far past the Nam Khan to the east and beyond the banks of the Mekong on the west. Below, the city carries on at its languorous pace, fairly undetectable but for the boats on the river. It's here where Buddha supposedly looked down upon the city (legend has it he left behind a footprint atop the hill, a three metre-long stamp now shrouded by a small temple). It's hard to imagine the view has changed much since then.