

Weaving together Laos' cultural mix

Luang Prabang's Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre offers a fascinating glimpse into the country's rich history

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When culture vultures head to the Unesco World Heritage town of Luang Prabang, they don't miss the opportunity to visit the temple Phra That Phou Si and the National Museum. However, not many visitors are aware of the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC), which offers a fascinating insight into Laos' diverse ethnic cultural mix.



Basketry and weaving by the Kmhmu.



Herbal medicines used by ethnic people.



Divination horns are shown beside paper cutouts representing ill people.

Opened in 2007 and housed in a renovated old building in the heart of town, the TAEC has more than 400 pieces of traditional handmade clothing and textiles, jewellery, handicrafts, household tools, baskets, reconstructions of domestic scenes and ritual and religious objects representing over 30 ethnic groups.

Stepping into the museum, visitors first see the permanent exhibition on four of Laos' most known ethnic minority groups — the Akha, Hmong, Kmhmu and Tai Lue. The "Akha: The Diversity Of An Ethnic Group" section shows the differences between subgroups of this people, and a headdress made of over 300 pieces of silver. More than 90,000 Akha people live in Laos. Outsiders can distinguish Akha subgroups by their clothing, such as details of the embroidery on a shirt, the colour of the trim and the type of skirt, while many Akha are differentiated by the shape of a woman's headdress.

The "Hmong: New Year Celebrations" section tells of the courtship traditions at Hmong New Year. Hmong are the fourth largest ethnic group in Laos, totalling more than 400,000 people. Their celebration of New Year, based on the lunar calendar, lasts up to 10 days, between December and January. This is an opportunity to honour ancestors and spirits through offerings and rituals and to take part in games, feasts, shows, bullfights and courtship. The Hmong ball throwing game, "pov pob", is a courting ritual where unmarried men and women face each other in a line and toss cloth balls to one another using only one hand. If someone drops the ball, he/she must sing a traditional song or hand an ornament from their costume to the opposite side.

The "Tai Lue: Cotton Clouds To Cloth" section displays the tools the Tai Lue use to turn raw cotton into thread for weaving. In Laos, there are more than 100,000 Tai Lue people. They excel in traditional arts, including silversmithing and weaving. Visitors see the Tai Lue cotton processing tools, such as a skein frame, cotton skein, spooling wheel, cotton gin, basket and spinning wheel, as well as Tai Lue clothing. The Tai Lue still weave textiles, including scarves, wall hangings and skirts. Many Tai Lue villages produced attire for royal families in the past.

The "Kmhmu: Baskets And Back Strap Looms" section explores the beauty of bamboo basketry in a Kmhmu home. The population of the Kmhmu in Laos totals over 600,000. They have a long history of bartering with their Tai neighbours, trading rice, wild products, baskets and sometimes labour for clothes, iron and other consumer goods.

A highlight here is a reconstruction of bamboo basket weaving. After collecting bamboo from the forest, the Kmhmu strip, scrape and sometimes soak it in water and then dry it to make it ready for weaving and to prevent insect infestation. Weaving can take less than a day for a rice steaming basket to several weeks for a large floor mat. Once completed, baskets are hung above the fire so that the smoke preserves them and keeps insects away.

The next room is home to a temporary exhibition, "Caregivers To Culture Keepers: Stories From Women In A Changing Laos". Eight ethnic women researchers from the Stitching Our Stories (SOS) project explore women's lives by investigating and documenting healing, handicrafts and child rearing within their communities. The exhibition features photographs, short documentary videos and objects including batik-making tools, divination horns and traditional baby carriers.

Visitors learn that Lao women are not only caregivers in their families but also provide physical and spiritual support to members of their communities. In Laos, knowledgeable women provide herbal medicines to combat illness and ease difficult births. Midwives and experienced mothers assist other women in child labour.

The exhibition explains how Tai women recuperate near a fire after childbirth. According to traditional beliefs, women lose heat during childbirth, so sitting by a fire and sipping herb-infused water helps mothers regain good health. The drink is also believed to help stimulate the production of breast milk. Ethnic groups' clothes and accessories for children are displayed, such as yao mien baby hats, called "njang ton moua", and Hmong baby bracelets, "saun teb", for stopping a baby crying and illness caused by evil spirits.

At the "Speaking To The Spirits" section, visitors learn about throwing divination horns. Divination horns are used by shaman and priests in several ethnic groups to communicate

with spirits. A shaman throws a pair of halved horns several times while asking questions to determine the cause of an illness, misfortune or accident.

TAEC is worth a visit for those wanting to know more about ethnic cultures in Laos and who want to cherish the beauty of ethnic art.

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- TAEC is situated at Ban Khamyong, Luang Prabang, Laos. Admission is 25,000 kip (100 baht) per person.
 - Visit www.taeclaos.org, email information@taeclaos.org or call (+856) 71253364.



Baby carriers used by the White Hmong, Yao Mien and Yao Mun ethnic groups.



Hmong costumes for New Year celebrations.



POSTgraphics

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