

# #DelveInto LAOS

FIND OUT WHY THE ALLURING CITY  
OF LUANG PRABANG IS MORE THAN  
INCENTIVE TRAVEL-READY. ▶▶▶



Sofitel Luang Prabang

## LAND OF ZEN

AN ACCORHOTELS REGIONAL MEDIA FAMILIARISATION TRIP TO LUANG PRABANG, LAOS, SHOWED *BIZ EVENTS ASIA* HOW THIS UNESCO-PROTECTED GEM WILL STEAL EVEN THE HARDEST OF HEARTS.

WORDS: GINA SIN

It was 44 degrees when we first touched down in Laos. Even for locals, the heat was unusual. But this did not dampen the group's enthusiasm in the city of Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site situated in the north of Laos.

Languid and lovely, Luang Prabang was once the royal capital until Vientiane became the administrative capital in 1946. Today, it remains as the most visited city in Laos. 90 percent of the people in the country work in agriculture, with rice accounting for 80 percent of agricultural production in Laos. This is an unspoiled destination that has yet to be discovered en masse – its religion, culture and tradition still tenacious. A natural beauty, Luang Prabang is surrounded by mountains and is 700 metres above sea level at the confluence of the Nam Khan and Mekong Rivers.

Explore the city's old-world charm made up of over 2,000 saffron-clad monks living in 33 gilded Buddhist temples and monasteries, breathtaking scenery, sustainable community outreach programmes, rich culture and Gallic villas revived as boutique hotels.

### GETTING THERE

The most convenient international gateway to Laos is Bangkok. Flying in from Singapore, it is well worth it to spend a night or two at Novotel Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel.

Great for large groups, the hotel offers 612 rooms and suites, seven restaurants and bars, a luxurious VOUS Spa, a swimming pool surrounded by tropical gardens complete with a pool bar, a business centre with secretarial services, 12 meeting rooms that accommodate up to 1,000 people and expansive spaces to accommodate various events. Its "24 Hours Flexi" and "Flexi Meal" allows for no set check-in time. Guests can arrive at any time and check out 24 hours later, as well as receive the usual breakfast meal adjusted to any buffet of the day (conditions apply).

En route to the land of Zen, check into one of Bangkok Airways' boutique lounges at Suvarnabhumi Airport, available to all Bangkok Airways passengers at no extra charge. The Blue Ribbon Club Lounge offers exclusive services to premium passengers flying with Bangkok Airways' business class. Apart from food and beverage options, hot meals, a personal shower room, a massage parlour and a library room – which can also be used as a small meeting room – are also available.

### STAY

Lunch at 3 Nagas Luang Prabang MGallery by Sofitel is one experience that should not be missed. The 3 Nagas restaurant gives a perfect introduction to the Lao cuisine, which consists of an assortment of fresh vegetables, spices,

buffalo meat, and more. This charming boutique hotel is within close proximity to the ancient city's major tourist attractions – it is only two blocks away from the Royal Palace Museum – and is housed in three restored UNESCO Heritage buildings. The hotel's 15 rooms blend historic architecture and modern contemporary charms.

In similar UNESCO-protected fashion, Sofitel Luang Prabang was once a century-old mansion of a former governor's, restored to its full grandeur and grace. Time seems to slow down at the hotel, being surrounded by a lush tropical garden and boasting 25 suites ranging from 46 to 120 sq m, each with its own private garden, oversized bathtub or private pool.

The hotel restaurant, Governor's Grill, offers a delectable blend of fine western gastronomy and traditional Lao cuisine. Guests enjoying the restaurant can choose cosy indoor seating or al-fresco dining in a colonial-style tent overlooking the garden. Sofitel Luang Prabang's private boardroom and lounge, Kaipen, accommodates up to 70 people, while The Garden is a great space to hold a 200-pax sunset cocktail event. Just beneath the meeting room, the hotel's Ka-toke cooking school can be booked as a team building cooking class.

To relax and rejuvenate, LE SPA offers treatments and therapies that combine



ancient Lao healing techniques with local organic products and the latest advances in skin care. Guests can also opt "Blind Massages", which are provided by local community members with disabilities as part of the hotel's sustainable development initiatives. These massages are slightly more vigorous and intense than usual due to the heightened senses of the therapists.

As Pablo Barruti, General Manager at Sofitel Luang Prabang sums it up, "Heritage is married with modern comfort, and the enduring tranquillity of the destination will appeal to guests in search of refuge in this age of sensory overload."

**EXPLORE AND EXPERIENCE**

It is almost a ritual for first-time Luang Prabang visitors to visit the Royal Palace Museum, which houses exhibits tracing back several centuries to the turbulent past of the Lane Xang kingdom and colonial era. Originally the residence of the royal family, the royal chambers, murals and artefacts have been carefully restored to offer a fascinating glimpse into the royal family's lifestyle.

The forests around Kuang Si Waterfall have always attracted a large number of butterflies. Olaf and Ineke from the Netherlands sold everything they had and moved to Luang Prabang to realise their dream of creating a research centre studying and publishing about Laos butterflies, host plants and other conservation projects



Morning market



Monks receiving Alms

Photo credits: SUPERADRIANME.com

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Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel Ballroom Foyer



Kuang Si Waterfall Park

brought about by environmental issues in Laos. The Butterfly Park was established 11 months after the couple started work in Laos. It is open to the public and creates educational experiences for schools to create awareness about the importance of preserving nature. Volunteer biologists, botanists and entomologists visit and train the local staff, who are funded by donations and entry ticket sales. Funding will also help provide safe and free transportation for groups up to 30 children.

Approximately 30 kilometres away from the city, Tat Kuang Si is home to one of the most stunning waterfalls in Southeast Asia as well as the Free the Bears Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre. Learn about the various bear species and the sanctuary's rescue efforts. Trek up to the top of the waterfall for some great photo opportunities or dip into one of the many cooling pools as you go downstream.

Social enterprise Ock Pop Tok began working with Lao artisans in 2000, after being inspired by a vision to create opportunities for weavers to advance their skills and secure a sustainable source of income for their families and communities. Nestled on the banks of the Mekong, Ock Pop Tok's Living



3 Nagas Luang Prabang MGallery by Sofitel

Crafts Centre offers visitors a chance to learn more about Lao textiles and handicrafts, including classes to create your own textile or weave your own bamboo basket.

For a touch of exclusivity, Luxury on the Mekong offers private boat charters for both overnight and day charters. The boat, named Dok Keow, is 28 metres in length and comes equipped with a kitchen, two bed rooms and ensuite bathroom, and a shower area. Catering and itineraries can be fully customised, such as a picnic or champagne brunch at a stopover on a sandbank.

**BOURNE IDENTITY**

The fabric of diverse ethnic groups, their traditions and cultural identities form the heart and soul of Laos. The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) is the only independent non-



Ock Pop Tok

profit museum and resource centre in Laos dedicated to the collection, preservation and interpretation of the traditional arts and lifestyles of the country's many ethnic groups. Learn about TAEC's broad range of museum and community engagement activities, or take part in one of the TAEC director-led seminars or half-day handicraft workshops.

While Luang Prabang is considered the tourism hub of Laos, it never feels like a bustling tourist trap found around the region. The languid pace, friendly faces and picturesque landscapes will more than make up for almost any weather conditions that may come your way.



Asian salad with buffalo meat