



CRAFTING HERSTORY IN LUANG PRABANG

Discovering the surprisingly
female-centric heart of Laos.

BY KATHY EOW

Considered the cultural and spiritual heart of Laos, the UNESCO World Heritage town of Luang Prabang offers gilded temples, striking karst mountains, and rich textiles as just a few of the charms that swiftly bring travelers to their Zen place. While Laos is a patriarchal society—men still predominate in traditionally male roles within local government and politics—women are beginning to take the lead in entrepreneurship. A visit to Laos’s former royal capital will introduce you to those women who give new meaning to the expression “minding their business.”

Slightly smaller than the state of Michigan, Laos, on Mainland Southeast Asia, is populated by a vibrant mosaic of 49 main ethnic groups and roughly 160 subgroups (belonging to four main language groups and speaking 82 living languages). At first, it’s a dizzying concept to wrap your head around, but Laos’s cultural *mélange* begins to make sense when you are immersed in the center of it all. From the international airport in Luang Prabang, it’s a short 15 minutes by car to the peninsula, the hub of tourist activity, where open-air shops, guesthouses, and crêpe stands run by Hmong, Kmhmu, and Lao Lum women and men line the main road.

PRIDE IN CULTURE

To better understand this ultimate melting pot—and to support an organization owned by women—head to the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, or TAEC; it’s located in the Khamyong neighborhood, on a hill overlooking the town.

Founded in 2006 by Thongkhoun Southvilay, a Luang Prabang resident,

and Tara Gujadhur, an American expat, TAEC is on a mission “to promote pride and appreciation for the cultures and knowledge of Laos’s diverse peoples, support ethnic communities to safeguard their tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and promote their sustainable livelihood development.”

The TAEC museum houses four permanent exhibitions representing the country’s most well-known ethnic groups—the Akha, Hmong, Tai Lue, and Kmhmu. The exhibitions display objects such as textiles, jewelry, and household tools that are unique to each culture. You can explore on your own or sign up for a guided tour.

Stitching Our Stories, a special exhibition focusing on local women, is one of TAEC’s many community initiatives aimed at celebrating and supporting local heritage. Through a partnership with Photo Forward, an international arts and media program, TAEC worked with a select group of local women on a two-year storytelling project. Armed with the basics in photography and videography taught by Photo Forward, the women

recorded their lives—an educational experience not just for outsiders but for the women themselves. Their photographs are on display permanently online at photoforward.org.

TAEC’s regional and global renown is the result of Southvilay’s extensive experience in museum conservation and collections and Gujadhur’s expertise in sustainable tourism and her background in anthropology. And they are grounded in a shared belief in the women of their community.

“What I do like,” Gujadhur says in an email, “is being able to show women in Laos, a place in which women aren’t traditionally expected to work outside the home, excel, speak out, or lead, that it is possible to do all these things, and that we can create and manage thriving businesses and organizations, provide employment, and earn income—without a man!”

For those who prefer learning through shopping, check out TAEC’s boutique store, on Sakkarine Road across from the Villa Santi Hotel. As you browse through intricately designed jewelry and colorful

beaded wallets, notice the differences in technique that are the signature of each ethnic group. In line with the principles of fair trade, the artisans who handcraft the items receive 50 percent of the sale price. (taeclaos.org)

Once you begin wandering around Luang Prabang, it won't take long to see local entrepreneurship in action. Fruit, fresh fish from the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, laundry detergent, and Beerlao are displayed for sale in front of wooden or whitewashed concrete houses, in the colorful entryways into people's homes. Fruit shake stands and noodle shops, too, are run out of people's homes, and many of these businesses are run by the family matriarch. Mrs. Tao is one such entrepreneur.

EAT SIMPLY AND WELL

For the last 12 years, she's operated a pho noodle shop out of her home in the Phonehueng neighborhood, on a quaint side street a few doors down from the nonprofit Big Brother Mouse. Even though her in-laws own the house (one day it will belong to her and her husband), she's clearly in charge—as cook, accountant, and business manager. "I wanted to make money and didn't know what else to do," she says when asked why she opened the shop. "But I knew I didn't want to work for anyone else."

Tucked behind young palm trees and bright bougainvillea, the shop might easily be missed by travelers were it not for the bilingual menu hanging outside. Pho, the simple yet satisfying

combination of broth, rice noodles, meat, herbs, and an optional chili sauce, is probably the most popular street food in Luang Prabang, and Mrs. Tao's never disappoints. Like most local vendors, Mrs. Tao uses aromatic basil and mint, and jeow sukee, an addicting peanut sauce that gives Vietnamese pho a Lao flavor, ingredients that are locally sourced from the lively morning market near Wat Mai. If soup in 90-degree weather isn't your thing, don't worry; Mrs. Tao also serves up a deliciously hearty omelet, fried rice, and noodle dishes—each for under \$4.00.

WEAVE AND CHILL

Ubiquitous in Luang Prabang are textiles, largely displayed as sinhs, or skirts, which you will quickly understand are more than just articles of clothing. The sinh is an iconic symbol of Laos, and the local weavers at Ock Pop Tok will not only explain its cultural significance, they'll show you how it's made.

Combining their technical weaving expertise, photography, and development training, but above all a love for the art and craft of Lao textiles, cofounders Veomanee Douangdala and Joanna Smith created Ock Pop Tok, which means "east meets west," in 2000. Since its inception, Ock Pop Tok, or OPT, has expanded from a boutique shop to a business-oriented, community-driven social enterprise (with roughly 600 local weavers) whose mission is "to elevate the profile of Lao textiles and artisans."

The heart and soul of OPT is the

Living Crafts Centre (LCC) across from Phou Si market overlooking the Mekong River. For the traveler, it is both a serene retreat from the busy streets and a one-stop hub for art, food, and shopping. Begin by taking a free guided tour of the tropical grounds, where you'll see women weavers at work and meet a vital component of silk weaving, the silkworm, housed in wooden crates. For a hands-on activity, take a class in weaving and dyeing, during which you'll prepare your own dyes from the LCC's plants and try your hand at weaving and spinning. On display and available for purchase at the LCC are intricately designed wall hangings (ask a staff member to explain the naga, a common motif), as well as gorgeous scarves and shawls. Profits from the artisanal wares sold here and in OPT's boutique shops in town are distributed according to fair trade principles. (ockpoptok.com)

Is it intimidating to run a women-oriented business in a patriarchal society? Not really, says Smith in an email. "Being women just makes it even more exciting and inspiring."

After exploring the LCC, relax with a refreshing tamarind juice or indulge in fresh spring rolls made from locally sourced ingredients at the Silk Road Café, right onsite. The tranquility just might lull you to sleep, in which case you should book one of the LCC's charming riverside villas. Four spacious and modern rooms are warmly decorated to represent distinct ethnic groups. Breakfast is included and can be enjoyed on your private



Natural dye class, Living Crafts Centre



A Talieng woman at the loom

balcony overlooking the majestic and very scenic Mekong River.

WHERE TO STAY

Occupying the town's tallest building, Indigo House is a centrally-located four-story hotel run by a Luang Prabang native, Ms. Souphaphone Sioudomphanh. Owned by her family since 1994, it is also Luang Prabang's first private hotel. Set on the main road half a block from the official tourism office, the delightful hotel boasts some of the best views of Luang Prabang. You'll be mesmerized

by the iconic night market below as you cool off with a Beerlao on the chilled-out fourth-floor terrace lounge.

From the café (with vegan options) on the ground level, watch life unfold in front of you as locals whiz by, taking their kids to school on motorbikes. Or relax in your private room, which has been elegantly designed in a chic blend of traditional and modern. Beautiful textiles soften teak furniture, paper lampshades cast a soothing light, and indigo, the warmest color, ties it all together. ●



Living Crafts Centre



Silk Road Cafe

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