

Ewen Bell follows the road less travelled to Luang Prabang, the ancient capital and spiritual centre of Laos.



GOLDEN CITY

on the Mekong



In the early morning light hundreds of monks dressed in orange robes walk silently through the streets of Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of Laos. The ritual of giving alms is repeated daily before the first rays of sunlight have cleared the horizon. Residents wait patiently outside their homes, placing offerings of food into the monks' bowls as they walk past in single file. The chain of orange winds through the streets for hundred of metres, and eventually the monks split off to return to their own temples.

Luang Prabang is a spiritual centre for the people of Laos, with a temple every few hundred metres in any direction. Not just any old run-down temples either, every one of them glistens with golden ornaments, tall prayer halls and elegant representations of the Buddha. And yet all of them have their own character and charm.

Wat Xieng Thong is a treasured favourite among the locals, sited near the geographical tip of town where the Kham River meets the Mekong. Colourful mosaics and graceful stupas bring a sense of joy to the spiritual setting. The fence line is not a high-walled barrier, but a simple line of bricks bordered

by frangipani trees, framing a view of the temples within and their steep pitched roofs.

Before communist rule in Laos this was the site for the coronation of kings. The ruler-in-waiting would arrive in Luang Prabang by river and spend three days contemplating within the temple before taking command of his kingdom. Today the daily routine for 'novice' monks is to contemplate the lessons of Buddha.

Young boys come to Luang Prabang from all over Laos to spend years studying, yet only a few will continue after the age of 18 to train for monk-hood. Most novices will return to life in their home towns and carry the teachings of Buddhism for the rest of their lives. This is one reason that the people of Laos have such a gentle nature when you meet them.

Most monks in Laos speak very good English, and I asked one young novice named Tuoi about joining the ritual of giving alms. Tuoi said, "It's OK for tourists for take part, but we don't just eat rice you know. We're very happy when people give us vegetables from the market."

Couples are welcome to participate in the morning alms, but there are a few rules to ensure you show the proper level of respect. Wear clothes that cover your shoulders and legs, take off your shoes and kneel down on a cloth so that you are never standing taller than the monks. The ritual takes place in silence, just place a small amount into the alms bowl of each monk who pauses in front of you.

Joining the morning alms is a beautiful experience, but you'll get a chance to meet monks any time of day just by wandering around town. Even the Buddhists enjoy a stroll down main street to get a fruit-shake. When the sun is shining the young boys carry golden umbrellas to keep the sun off their heads, which makes them even easier to spot.

Shopping in Luang Prabang is a delight because no-one hassles you as you walk by. You can browse first and bargain later, no questions asked.

There is no shortage of exquisite quality silks to tempt the fussy traveller, all set against a backdrop of the UNESCO listed streets and the tasteful style of French colonial architecture. Up-market textile stores and boutique beauty spas mingle between the elegant hotels and charming cafes – none of which have enough room for more than a handful of guests.

Everything in Luang Prabang is presented with style and on a pleasingly small scale. Well, everything except the fruit shakes. \$1 will buy you two shakes and you'll get some change, but the good news doesn't stop there.

For an indulgent dining experience head to the Three Elephants restaurant. Savouring a feast of unique Laos cuisine costs around \$10 per couple, and bamboo parcels of sticky rice and fish salads drenched in lime juice are just the beginning. Further along the street are a couple of recently opened wine bars that specialise in after-dinner tipples and a hand selected range of wines ideally suited to the local conditions.

It's a good idea to choose accommodation within the old town of Luang Prabang, you may not want a long walk home after a night out.

Cooking classes are also an option for those who want to take home the flavours of Luang Prabang. The owners of Tamarind Cafe have made their name by serving traditionally prepared Laos food and sharing their secrets in the kitchen. You'll have to grind your own spices, chop the salads into tiny morsels and slowly cook dishes over a pit of coals.



No cooking class is complete without a trip to the morning market either, and in Luang Prabang it's like walking through an overgrown vegetable patch, with fresh greens and herbs filling in the narrow spaces of the laneway.

Next door to the market is the former Royal Palace, which now houses the National Museum full of all things Lao. Cultural relics and a magnificent adjoining temple are both very lovely, but the palm-fringed lily pond is the secret pleasure of the palace. By mid morning the flowers have opened up to share their splash of colour with the world. Giant bees hum across the petals of water-lilies and monks rest on the edge of the pond to contemplate prayers without words.

Once you arrive in Luang Prabang it's hard to convince yourself to leave town at all. The pace is so gentle, the dining so enticing and the monks so serene that you can quickly find that low gear and allow your spirit to relax.

A few kilometres out of the town are handicraft villages, Buddhist caves, waterfalls and elephant treks. There is no shortage of options to hike, bike or paddle about the rural landscape, but then again there is no shortage of divine little dining options to explore along main street. The tourist trail is not well worn in Luang Prabang, so don't feel you need to wear it out by leaving town in a hurry.

Photography Ewen Bell

Clockwise from top left: Local novice monk; morning markets; Wat Choum Khong - sourinthame; main street



fact file

When to Travel:

The best weather is from November to April when the dry season provides lots of sunshine, cool mornings and very little humidity. Book flights directly with Thai Airways on 1300 651 960 to ensure good connections to Luang Prabang via Bangkok.

Where to Stay:

Villa Santi Hotel is located in the very depth of the old town near fine dining at Three Elephants, cooking classes at Tamarind and morning monks at Xieng Thong. The hotel offers more than a touch of colonial style and an appreciation for service. Rooms start from \$90 a night, book online at www.agoda.com/asia/laos

Just for Two:

Imperial Expeditions offer private trips in Laos for groups of two or more, including 5-star accommodation and sightseeing trips to the Buddhist caves, waterfalls and ethnic minority villages. The five-day excursion is priced from \$1,600 excluding international flights, book online at www.imperialepeditions.com or call 02 8005 0499.

More Information:

Go online to www.destination-laos.net for the official guide to Laos tourism. Visas for Australians and New Zealanders are issued on arrival but require a fee of \$35 and a copy of your passport photo. The local currency is 'kip' and one Australian dollar buys you 8,000 kip.

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