Wishing you a Peaceful Vesak
The northern town of Luang Prabang in Laos is located on a peninsula at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers. Once a regional centre of Buddhism (a fact attested to by the spectacular wats that dot the town) and the capital of the illustrious Lan Xang kingdom (1354-1707), Luang Prabang reaped the benefits of its strategic location along the Silk Route (ancient network of trade routes connecting the East and West).

Despite the shifting of the capital to Vientiane in the mid-16th century, the town remained an important cultural and religious centre. Luang Prabang became a French protectorate three centuries later, and this Gallic influence is evidenced by the many colonial buildings that fuse French style with Lao tradition. This rich architectural and artistic heritage – gilded wats filled with magnificent sculptures to colonial villas accented by traditional plaited bamboo panels – offers a glimpse into another era.

While attractions abound in town, the mountain ranges that encircle the town host majestic waterfalls and hiking trails ideal for the intrepid adventurer. A gentler pace of life and warm local hospitality combine to make this town a serene sanctuary.

**MUST SEE/DO**

**WAT XIENG THONG**, or the golden city monastery, with its distinctive tiered and sloped-roof sim (main temple) was built in 1560 by King Setthathirat (1548-71). The interior and exterior walls of the sim are embellished with intricate stencilled motifs that depict scenes from Buddhist folklore. The Red Chapel, a shrine within the monastery complex, houses a two-metre long bronze reclining Buddha, said to be among the country’s most treasured sculptures.

**KUANG SI WATERFALL**, situated some 30km south of Luang Prabang, is a breathtaking three-tier waterfall, popular with day-trippers and trekkers. Boasting crystal-clear turquoise pools, the falls offer visitors a refreshing dip after a hike. Community-based tour operator, Fair Trek www.fairtrek.org, offers a trail to Kuang Si that weaves through orchards and rice fields, and includes a visit to a local village inhabited by the Khmu and Hmong indigenous people, before culminating at the spectacular falls.

**ROYAL PALACE MUSEUM** documents the history of Luang Prabang’s monarchy and the city’s colonial heritage. Dating back to the early 20th century, the structure – a fusion of Lao and French architecture – is a repository of royal paraphernalia and religious artefacts. The once private quarters of the royals are also open to the public.

**TAEC**, or Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, is an independent resource centre dedicated to the country’s ethnic communities. Through the preservation and promotion of their traditions, culture and arts, TAEC aims to safeguard the heritage of these diverse communities, as well as support their sustainable livelihood. The centre houses more than 400 carefully curated
Visitors to Luang Prabang will discover a distinctive cuisine flavoured by both Lao and French influences. My favourite ice-cream parlour is located at the 3 NAGAS RESTAURANT in the heart of town. The artisanal selections make the best use of fresh and seasonal ingredients, including Lao coffee, rosella (hibiscus) and coconut. For amazing pastries, head to LE BANNETON CAFÉ, one of the best bakeries in town. This family-run boulangerie-cum-café serves up melt-in-the-mouth croissants that taste better than the ones I’ve eaten in Paris! Also on the menu are a variety of freshly made breads, pastries and refreshing salads. Located in an old wooden house facing a temple, this bakery has a quaint ambience. Just outside the town centre is another one of my favourite spots for good food and a spot of shopping. The SILK ROAD CAFÉ at the OCK POP (www.ockpoptok.com) weaving centre overlooks the Mekong and offers scrumptious salads with organic ingredients, as well as high tea. More importantly, OCK POP TOK is a socially-responsible project that supports weavers from local communities. Stroll the grounds and watch the artisans weave their magic or sign up for a basic weaving class. The intricately-woven textiles are also available for sale and make great souvenirs.

Luang Prabang has many natural wonders that eco-explorers will enjoy. On my time off, I often head out to the countryside to kayak its many streams or bike in the hills that encircle Luang Prabang. If you wish to explore rural Laos, simply hop on a ferry across the Mekong. Among the many riverside villages is BAN CHAN, famed for its traditional handmade pottery. Here, one can watch clay pots being fired in earthen ovens, and experience a more rustic way of life. It’s also a great place to pick up a keepsake!