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LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

This UNESCO World Heritage Site boasts gilded *wats* (temples), charming colonial buildings and a languid vibe.



IMAGE: GETTY

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

ABOVE A monk at a temple door, Wat Xieng Thong

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.

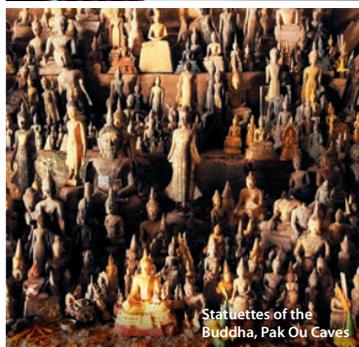
TAEC, or Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, is an independent resource centre dedicated to the country's ethnic communities. Through the preservation and promotion of their traditions, culture and arts, TAEC aims to safeguard the heritage of these diverse communities, as well as support their sustainable livelihood. The centre houses more than 400 carefully curated



Kuang Si Waterfall



Laap



Statuettes of the Buddha, Pak Ou Caves



Royal Palace Museum

objects that range from tools to textiles representing over 30 ethnic groups. Rotating exhibitions offer insight into the rich culture of these ethnic communities. www.taec Laos.org

PAK OU CAVES, located at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Ou rivers 25km north of Luang Prabang, are considered among the holiest sites in the country. Statuettes of the Buddha left behind by pilgrims upon completing the hike to the caves adorn their interiors, and during the Lao New Year, locals make the pilgrimage upriver to bathe the statuettes, a ritual they believe will bring them merit.

EAT

LAAP or *larb*, is a Laotian salad made with minced meat (pork, chicken or beef) and handfuls of chopped fresh herbs such as coriander and mint. Chopped chillies add a dose of fiery flavour while a squeeze or two of lime gives this simple yet flavourful staple a refreshing zing. Learn to make *laap* and other Lao dishes such as *mok pa* (banana-leaf steamed fish) at Tamarind (www.tamarindlaos.com), a restaurant/cooking school that employs locally-sourced ingredients in its menu. 📍

✈️ **GETTING THERE** THAI AIRASIA FLIES TO LUANG PRABANG FROM BANGKOK DAILY. www.airasia.com

SLEEP



SATRI HOUSE

📍 057 PHOTHISARATH ROAD BAN THATLUANG, LUANG PRABANG



KIRIDARA HOTEL

📍 13TH NORTH ROAD, BAN NAVIENGKHAM, LUANG PRABANG



3 NAGAS LUANG PRABANG MALLERY BY SOFITEL

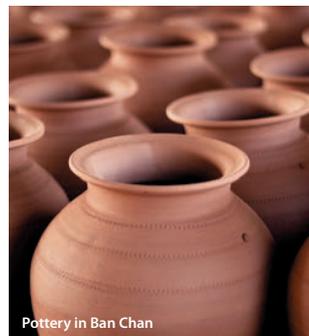
📍 BAN VATNONG, SAKKALINE ROAD, LUANG PRABANG

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Inside Scoop



Luang Prabang-based hotel general manager, **Pablo Barruti**, lists his favourite local hangouts in and around the UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Pottery in Ban Chan

IMAGES 123RF

"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 TOK** (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!"