



Boutique Bliss

The colonial allure of Luang Prabang's upmarket hotels is drawing visitors from around the world, who are attracted by the combination of old-world charm and modern luxury.

Daniel Allen

Since its foundation as center of "the empire of a million elephants" by King Fa Ngum in 1353, Luang Prabang has enchanted visitors with its intoxicating blend of stunning scenery and fascinating culture. More compact, sophisticated and attractive than the Laotian capital Vientiane to the south, the town remains a charming relic of *l'Indochine Francaise*, and its rich regal and colonial heritage means Luang Prabang is now firmly established on Southeast Asia's luxury travel map.

No surprisingly the French adored Luang Prabang, so poised on its peninsula, so elegant with its pagoda roofs sweeping down like golden wings. They built villas and cafes to admire their beautiful surroundings – the same

cafes where visitors sit today, sipping red wine, munching delicate pastries and watching monks glide gracefully past in their signature saffron robes.

Luang Prabang's colonial villas now provide the basis for the town's growing collection of luxury hotels and restaurants. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995, development in Luang Prabang has thankfully been a carefully considered process. Every building, from the smallest guesthouse to the largest hotel, has to adhere to strict guidelines concerning design and décor, and planning applications are frequently rejected.

La Residence Phou Vao, run by the Orient Express Group and long-considered Luang Prabang's premiere hotel, is the piece de resistance of the town's fine array

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of architectural wonders. Reminiscent of a rambling French colonial mansion, complete with crisp white walls, dark sienna tile roofing and capacious shuttered verandas, this exclusive resort nestles amongst beautiful gardens on Phu Vao (Kite Hill), about one kilometer from the center of town.

La Residence's operating philosophy is clear. "We aim to give guests the best service, the most privacy and the finest facilities in town," explains Reservations Manager Phonexay Keuthbounmany. "Although we currently only have 32 rooms and two suites, we are currently in the process of extending the hotel's capacity with another building in the grounds. The hotel is fully booked most of the year, and the demand for luxury accommodation in Luang Prabang is growing all the time."

Another Luang Prabang hotel with rooms in strong demand is the 3 Nagas by Alila,

formerly Les 3 Nagas boutique hotel, which has a prime location on the town's main street. Taken over by Alila Hotels and Resorts in early 2008, the hotel has a colorful history, comprising three UNESCO-listed buildings more than a century old. The complex was originally constructed in 1898 to host the Laotian royal court, before later becoming an

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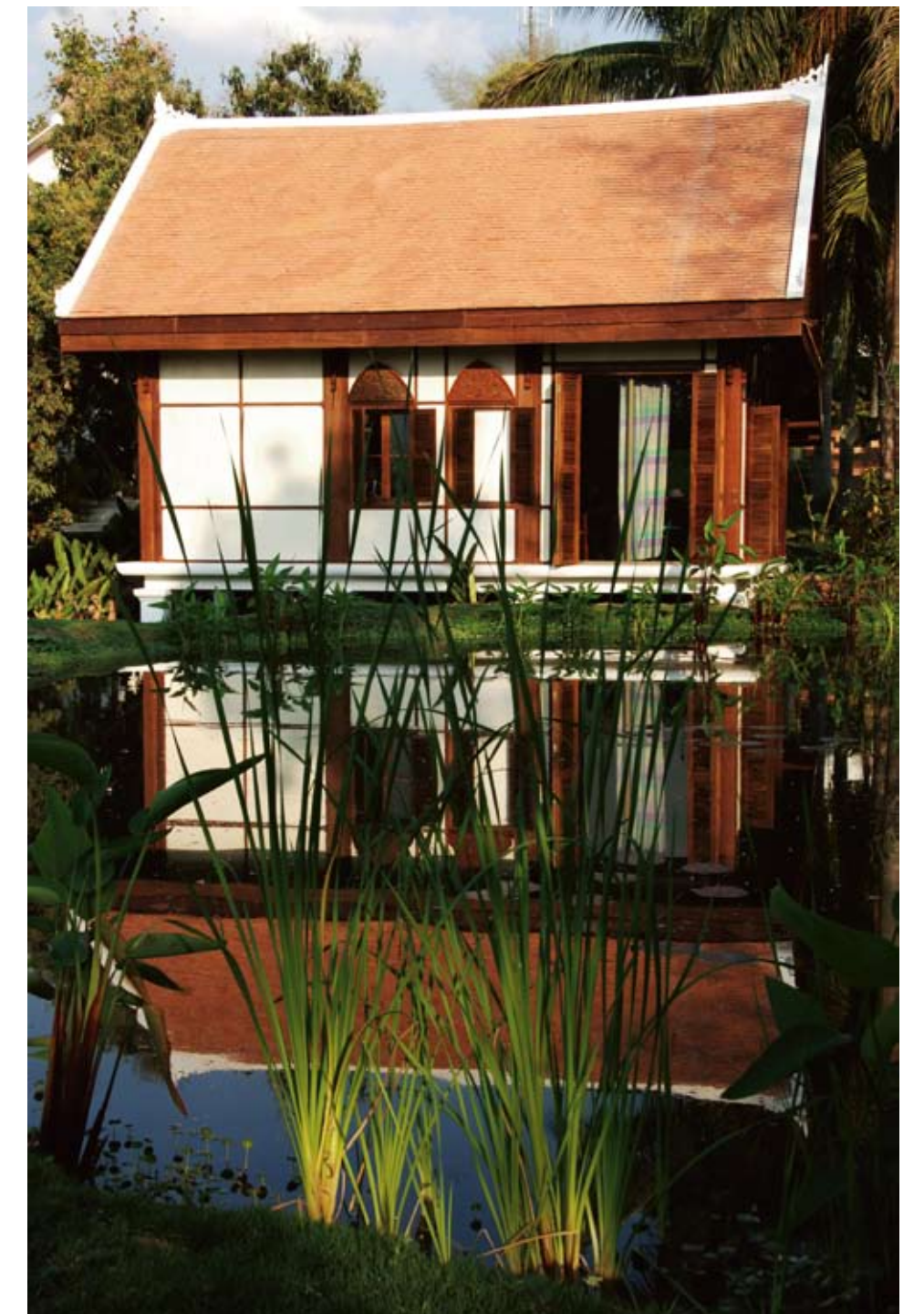
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some of the area's premier attractions. Apart from the varied delights of Luang Prabang itself, there are a number of other must-see sites nearby. The impressive cascades at Kuang Si, about 25 kilometers south of the town, are a 30-minute drive by air-conditioned minibus, with the road passing through several charming villages on the way. There are also boat trips to the karst caves at Pak Ou, about 30 kilometers up the Mekong,

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ice cream factory, and then a hotel.

Following a recent restoration, the 3 Nagas today is a tasteful mélange of colonial architecture and contemporary Lao design, featuring exotic wooden flooring, wattle-and-daub walls and clay roofing. The use of materials and construction techniques has beautifully preserved the hotel's heritage, while modern comforts such as wireless internet and flat screen TVs have been seamlessly integrated with the decor to create a chic and comfortable environment.

With its 12 rooms and three suites, the 3 Nagas by Alila has a very compact feel. "It is our intention to give the hotel a homely atmosphere," says general manager Adi Jaya.

"We pride ourselves on making guests feel extremely welcome. Another great reason to stay here is our location. Guests who want to watch the monks receiving alms in the early morning, which is of course a quintessential Luang Prabang experience, simply need to step outside."

As with La Residence Phou Vao, dining at the 3 Nagas is a culinary delight. French chef Sebastien Rubis, a long-term resident of Luang Prabang, offers a mouthwatering selection of fusion dishes, which he collectively titles "gastronomy Lao." The buffalo brochette with sweet potato and tomato raisin chutney is a particular favorite, perfectly complemented by an extensive selection of fine wines from

around the globe.

Completing Luang Prabang's trio of top hotels is Maison Souvannaphoum, run by Angsana Resorts and Hotels. The former residence of Laotian Prince Souvannaphouma, this beautifully restored, classic colonial building sits amongst gorgeous grounds close to the center of town. Facilities include a poolside restaurant, Elephant Blanc, and an indulgent spa. "We offer a home-away-from-home experience here," says Manager Richard Neo, although many guests will find the hotel a serious step up from their own residence.

La Residence Phou Vao, 3 Nagas, and Maison Souvannaphoum all offer private tours, allowing guests to discreetly sample



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where the intrepid can wonder at hundreds of Buddha statuettes placed inside by devoted local villagers.

Luang Prabang is also a shopper's paradise, with a wide variety of shops offering antiques, art work, photography, clothing and handicrafts. Those interested in purchasing high end antiques should check out the Pathana Boupha Antique House, which offers a fine array of textiles, wooden carvings, and silver and bronzeware. The Kopnoi Boutique and Gallery close by offers some exquisite designer jewelry, silk clothing and homeware, all made by local artisans.

A French saying runs along the lines of: "Vietnamese grow rice, Cambodians watch it grow and Laotians listen to it grow." While this may be a slight exaggeration, there's no denying that life in Laos rarely moves out of first gear. If you're looking for the perfect base for evaluating this insightful piece of Gallic humor, the colonial charm of Luang Prabang's boutique hotels is hard to beat. ■

Photographs courtesy of: Daniel Allen



La Residence Phou Vao

Ph: +856 71 212194 / 212530
www.residencephouvao.com

Maison Souvannaphoum Hotel

Rue Chao Fa Ngum, Luang Prabang
Ph: +856 7125 4609
www.coloursofangsana.com

3 Nagas by Alila

Ban Vatnong, Sakkaline Road,
Luang Prabang
Ph: +856 7125 3888
www.alilahotels.com

Pathana Boupha Antique House

26/2 Ban Visoun, Luang Prabang
Ph: +856 7121 2262

Kopnoi Boutique and Gallery

Ban Alphay, Luang Prabang
www.kopnoi.com