

Travel

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CHECK IN/CHECK OUT

**LUANG PRABANG, LAOS:
LA RÉSIDENCE PHOU VAO**

THE BASICS

The town of Luang Prabang, the ancient royal capital of Laos, has long attracted visitors because of its elegant mix of traditional Laotian architecture and well-preserved French colonial villas and patisseries, all overlooking the chocolaty Mekong River. But La Résidence Phou Vao, owned by a company that has restored many colonial properties in Asia, is Luang Prabang's first true luxury boutique hotel. The hotel resembles a sprawling French colonial mansion, with bleached white walls, burnt sienna tile roofs, and spacious shuttered verandas. Narrow footpaths wind past crumbling Buddhist stupas and nearly overgrown gardens, leading to the hotel's spa. Service is fast and attentive without the over-the-top obsequiousness that sometimes becomes uncomfortable at luxury hotels in Asia.

THE LOCATION

Perfect for serenity, slightly less ideal for visiting the town of Luang Prabang. Since the hotel sits on a hill covered with frangipani and palms, you hear little but the occasional morning chanting of monks and see only glittering temples in the distance, hazy in the mist. The hotel sits roughly a mile from Luang Prabang, which can be a long walk on a steamy afternoon. La Résidence provides a shuttle into town and also rents bicycles, which are perfect for exploring the area.

THE ROOMS

Only 32 rooms and 2 suites. In my room, the large wooden bed had extremely soft sheets and mosquito netting, though I saw no bugs anyway. Rooms on the second floor of the hotel offer the best views, facing the lush mountains nearby; rooms on the ground floor look out only onto the hotel gardens.

THE BATHROOM

Huge but simple, with toilet separate from a shower made from smooth, green marble — and water pressure so strong I felt as if my face were being sandblasted.

THE AMENITIES

The long, narrow, elegantly landscaped pool looks out onto the golden

temple atop nearby Mount Phousi. At night, tiny lanterns float on the pool, creating a flickering, magical light for dinner at the poolside restaurant. The spa, tiny villas set around a water lily pond, uses local ingredients. Try the almost chiropractic Lao massage, in which a masseuse applies hard pressure all over your body with her thumbs and palms. Wireless Internet is available in the lobby area and the restaurant. The hotel can organize boat trips on the Mekong.

ROOM SERVICE

A celebration of Luang Prabang food, a fusion cuisine mixing fresh Lao ingredients, like Mekong perch and watercress, with touches of French style. Try ping kai, grilled chicken in-



Some rooms at La Résidence face mountains.

fused with lemongrass (\$7), and platom (\$4.50), a spicy soup made with local fish, citronella and mushrooms. (The room service menu includes everything from burgers to smoked salmon.) Room service is supposedly available between 11 a.m. and 10 p.m., but I found I could call anytime and get snacks or drinks. Waiters deliver food within 15 minutes.

THE BOTTOM LINE

For a high-end experience, La Résidence comes at a bargain price. Doubles start at \$145 in low season, which runs from May 1 until Sept. 30. Suites top out at \$379 in the peak winter season. The dollar is widely accepted in Laos, alongside the local kip. Bangkok Airways flies direct to Luang Prabang from the Thai capital.

La Résidence Phou Vao, 3 Post Office Box 50, Luang Prabang; (856) 71-212-194; www.residencephouvao.com.

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