



Story Susan Kurosawa

LA RESIDENCE PHOU VAO

Luang Prabang, Laos

Luang Prabang, beautifully located on a peninsula at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, is Laos's most delightful riverside town, its French colonial buildings and historic precincts protected by UNESCO. My chosen carriage here, to and from La Residence Phou Van each day, is a motorbike-powered tuktuk. Luck is not always with me, however. If the vehicle I hop aboard in town is on the aged side, it is entirely possible it will conk out halfway up Phou Vao hill en route to my elevated hotel.

In Luang Prabang, the entry and exit of tuktuks is via the rear, so one has to hang on grimly if the ropey old machine starts to slide. On the days we actually make it to the hotel's porte-cochere and I don't have to hike the last hump of the hill, it is to the eternal credit of La Residence Phou Vao staff that they don't howl in laughter as we putter up (nor smugly mention the hotel's gorgeous tuktuk shuttle with uniformed driver).

I may be no dab hand at selecting superior tuktuks but my choice of hotel is another matter entirely. This lovely 34-room Orient-Express property is small and friendly and it feels like coming home after a day of shopping and sightseeing; staff appear like genies

freshly popped from brass lamps to carry bags, to proffer chilled handtowels and iced glasses of hibiscus flower juice or cups of mulberry tea. The hill location, about 10 minutes from Luang Prabang proper, is suitably majestic with blue-green views of mountains and valleys, shawled in mist in the mornings. As the sun burns through, the Buddhist stupa atop Mt Phousi, on the far horizon, appears like a developing photograph. It's such a focal point of La Residence Phou Vao's broad panorama that the hotel foots the electricity bill for its golden spire to be illuminated in soft blues each night. The effect is of a shimmering tableau all but stitched in coloured thread on a black background.

Teak and rosewood-trimmed guestrooms are as spacious as most hotel junior suites, with a pretty sitting area, balcony furnished with inviting lounges, big bed swathed with mosquito netting and a bathroom that may not be the 21st-century ideal (showerhead the size of a dinner plate and space-age taps) but is nonetheless roomy and immaculately clean with terrazzo bath and double basins. From my room, I look over a feathery spread of bamboo, coconut palms and frangipani and it feels as if I'm in a mountain lodge, planets removed from the silk shops and backpacker bars of Luang Prabang proper.





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Dining The food at Residence Phou Vao is not the best value in town but the breakfast buffet is superb; there's mandarin juice, house-made yoghurt, banana lassi, tamarind and papaya jams and, thanks be to the French, crusty loaves and flaky pastries. To have at least one dinner here is a treat. Myriad floating votive candles are popped into the pool, which is in front of the open-sided restaurant, and they flicker away like colonies of fireflies. Lanterns are raised into the trees and this glowing scene is hemmed by the glossy bushiness of abundant bougainvillea and heliconia.

Standouts in the blend of local and European dishes include catfish steamed in banana leaves and spiced with lemongrass, fish sauce, dill, lime and skerrick of bird's-eye chilli. Fish, chicken, beef or pork are threaded, satay style, on lemongrass skewers; between courses, a sherbet shot might appear, in flavours as beguiling as cinnamon or hibiscus.

Hot tip The hotel offers a 500 candles dinner, which is not as naff as it sounds. Couples are set up at a garden or terrace table adorned with bowls of white irises and surrounded by hundreds of tealights in the so-called Spirit Gardens. There's a 10-course degustation menu and, for the finale, the chance to light and release a good-luck lantern into the sky.

Stepping out Luang Prabang is tiny and safe to stroll about. Try L'Elephant for French classics with an Asian touch, and Tamarind, a cafe-style eatery where Australian expat Caroline Gaylard and her Laotian partner produce authentic and inexpensive village fare. Shop for silks at Ock Pop Top, bespoke jewellery by Fabrice Munio at Naga Creations, and mulberry paper lanterns at Oliver Bandmann's Ban Khily Gallery.

Everyone's talking about La Residence Phou Vao's newish spa, a series of pitch-roofed pavilions set down garden paths and steps (the hotel is recommended only for the fleet of foot) and beside a lotus pond and plunge pool, with its array of scrubs, wraps and scented baths. The crowing of local roosters is an unusual accompaniment to tinkling spa music.

Essentials A Lao Cultural Experience package includes a Lao cooking class or a half-day tuktuk tour of Luang Prabang, transfers and a set dinner. From \$US264.90 [\$390] per couple per night in a deluxe room. Packages also available that combine the Eastern & Oriental Express train (Bangkok, Singapore, Malaysia) and sister property La Residence d'Angkor in Siem Reap, Cambodia. More at residencephouvao.com. 
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Gaze towards infinity – and the Buddhist stupa at the top of Mt Phousi – from La Residence Phou Vao's emerald-tiled pool; during the evening the poolside terrace (above left) becomes a romantic dining area. The hilltop hotel is an oasis of calm and tranquillity, just 2km from the heritage town of Luang Prabang.