

Luang Prabang: The Spiritual Heart of Laos

Luang Prabang is rich in cultural heritage, and is known as the seat of Lao culture, with monasteries, monuments traditional costumes and surrounded by many types of nature's beauty.



In 1995 UNESCO declared Luang Prabang a World Heritage Site. This distinction confirms, through the concerted action of local, national and international authorities, a real motivation to preserve this wonderfully serene city. The title is justified not only by the many beautiful temples, but also by its traditional wooden dwellings, the old colonial style houses and the natural environment that encases it in a perfect harmony of plant and stone.

Luang Prabang is situated in the centre of northern Laos. The province has a total population of just over 400,000 that includes 12 distinct ethnic groups. The Khmu are the largest ethnic group in the province and make up the majority (about 44%) of the provincial population. They are a Mon-Khmer speaking people known for their knowledge of the forest, and they are believed to be the original inhabitants of Laos. The Hmong are the second most populous ethnic minority.



Archaeological evidence suggests that Luang Prabang has been inhabited since at least 8,000 BC. The first Laos kingdom, Lane Xang, was founded here in the 14th century by King Fa Ngum after he conquered and unified the lands of modern-day Xiengkhouang , the Khorat Plateau and Luang Prabang.

The city was first referred to as Muang Swa and by 1357 the name was again changed to Muang Xieng Dong Xieng Thong by local inhabitants. Shortly thereafter, King Fa Ngum accepted a golden Buddha image called the Pha Bang as a gift from the Khmer monarchy and the thriving city-state became known as Luang Prabang.

Luang Prabang was the capital of Lane Xang until moved to Vientiane in 1545 by King Setthathirath (although Luang Prabang remained the country's main religious centre). The city's first contact with western emissaries occurred in the mid 17th century during the reign of King Surigna Vongsa. After his death in 1694, Lane Xang broke up into three separate Kingdoms; Vientiane, Champasack and Luang Prabang.

By the late 19th century Luang Prabang was under attack by marauding Black Flag bandits who destroyed many sacred Buddha images, temples and historical documents. Under King Sisavang Vong (1904-1959) a number of restoration and beautification projects were launched, many of which are still evident today. French-style buildings began to appear in the later 1800's, adding to the mixture of Lao, Tai-Lue, Burmese, Chinese and Tai architecture.



Landmarks

National Museum

The National Museum, constructed in 1904, is laid out in a cruciform shape and accessed from a side entrance. Various royal religious objects are displayed in the large entrance hall. Many gifts from foreign envoys (including a rock from the moon !) and religious and culture artifacts are on display including the Phabang (' Buddha image'), the gold standing 14th century Buddha image from which Luang Prabang derives its name.

Wat Xieng Thong

Built during the 16th Century by King Saysetthathirath and completed in 1560. Wat Xieng Thong temple is one of the most interesting examples of art and Buddhist architecture. The ornate carved and gilded funeral vehicle of the former king is kept in one of the buildings in the temple grounds.

This temple was used to organize the highest Royal Ceremonies and houses the bones of King Sisavangvong. The intricate golden facades, colorful murals, glass mosaics and unique three-layered roof make this one of the most beautiful temples in Asia. The temple is not only the most beautiful in Luang Prabang, but arguably one of the most spectacular in the entire country. It is a classic example of Luang Prabang style during the golden year of the Lane Xang kingdom and is noted for its gratefully sloping roof and glass murals.

Kuang Si Waterfall

Situated 25 km south of Luang Prabang, Kuang Si Waterfall makes for an excellent daytrip. Accessible by Tuk -Tuk, minivan, Motorcycle or bicycle. The 650 feet high waterfall is at its most picturesque during the wet season however it can be visited year-round. Children are not recommended to climb to the top of the waterfall, but they can swim in the various pools at the bottom. On the road out to Kuang Si Waterfall, there are a number of villages housing traditional

hydro-rice mills.

Tad Sae Falls

Located 15 kms southeast of Luang Prabang, the falls can easily be reached by taxi. The picturesque journey allows visitors to admire the countryside, while the falls themselves are small but impressive. It is not unusual for visitors to have the falls to themselves. Swimming is possible in some of the tiered pools and at the base of the falls.

Ban Phanom

This village, located 4 km to the north of Luang Prabang, was a former royal weaving village, and is now an official tourism village. You can view women working on their looms, buy their products and stroll in the village; it can be reached by bicycle or Tuk-Tuk.

Ban Xieng Mene

Located across the Mekong from Luang Prabang Town in Chomphet District; Ban Xieng Mene is part of the World Heritage Site and offers a glimpse into Lao village life. There are several temples worth visiting in the village, including Vat Chomphet (visible up on the hill) which offers a spectacular view of Luang Prabang Town and the Mekong. Ban Xieng Mene is also the starting point for several short walks and bike-rides in the district, as well as longer two and three day treks.

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