

LAOS, LUXURIOUSLY

Explore Laos in style with this curated selection of beautifully designed hotels and resorts.



Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos make up the French colonial Indochina, a region once associated with romantic mysticism - and perhaps still is. Although Vietnam and Cambodia recovered from the ravages of war and became two of the world's most sought-after tourist destinations, Laos remained isolated under communist rule.

With travel lanes opening up, Laos' erstwhile royal capital Luang Prabang has seen a stampede of tourists. Michael Roehrig, director of Trails of Indochina's Laos office, says that Luang Prabang is home to the best-preserved vestiges of Indochina's architecture.

Michael has spent about 15 years in Laos and is well known for knowing the country's nuances, which is why he heads operations in Laos for Trails of Indochina, one of the most renowned and established DMCs in the region.

However, one could argue that there are more exemplary



PHOTO 3NAGASLUANGPRABANG

examples of Indochina architecture in Vietnam and Cambodia. Nevertheless, Michael is correct that Luang Prabang's old town is perhaps the most densely packed with French colonial buildings on its narrow streets that run along the confluence of the Nam Khan and the Mekong.

Interspersed between colonial structures are some 30 temples with quintessentially Laotian architecture, delicate carvings, sumptuous red and gold paintwork and magnificent murals. The French Colonial and traditional Laos fusion creates Luang Prabang's unique allure.

The colonial buildings are fast becoming hotels, restaurants, bars and boutiques catering to the barrage of tourists whose numbers almost equal Laos' seven million people.

Founder of Aman Resorts Adrian Zecha, often hailed as the

most visionary hotelier of our time, is one of Luang Prabang's most ardent admirers.

Despite no longer being affiliated with Aman Resorts, his name will forever be associated with the concept of boutique hotels that changed how luxury travel is done.

Adrian visits Luang Prabang every year, usually on his birthday (Feb 26), staying at his heritage villa, which he restored for a disabled and impoverished old Lao royal.

Now in his late 80s, he says he would love to convert the colonial primary school into a hotel, inspired by Luang Prabang's architecture.

Adrian, who knows everyone, has been spotted with Naomi Campbell and may be anywhere on his birthday, including at one of his newly-opened Azerai resorts in Vietnam.



PHOTO ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG

Why Luang Prabang? Look at Laos through Adrian's eyes, and you'll see why!

There is a laid-back luxury to Laos. Possibly, this is due to its recent political stability.

However, Michael dispels this myth by revealing that Laos is the world's most bombed country because the US waged war against Laos to prevent communism from taking over and failed – despite dropping 270 million cluster bombs on Laos. Of these, 80 million remain unexploded, shattering the anatomies of Laotians.

Michael creates off-beat itineraries, including a trip to the UXO (Unexploded Ordinances) Center. You will come away astonished to learn that Laos has managed to preserve its art, architecture, and cultural heritage, some of which are present in some of the country's most exciting hotels and restaurants despite its turbulent past.



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- MICHAEL ROEHRIG, TRAILS OF INDOCHINA

HOTELS



PHOTO BELMOND RESIDENCE PHOU VAO

BELMOND RESIDENCE PHOU VAO

In this secluded, all-suite, hilltop haven, quaint French colonial chic meets Asian exoticism to evoke the romance of a bygone era. Consider half-pillars with arched wooden poles, stone ponds, huge earthen urns, and antique lamps set bewitchingly as embellishments.

Suites feature dark wooden floors, four-poster beds draped in foamy white curtains, and bathrooms with stone tubs and natural toiletries.

Don't think you'll leave your suite or pool? We predict that you will to enjoy the hot bamboo massage at the spa

village with its cottages arcing around the spa's private pool. Following your treatment, you may be escorted to a secluded pavilion for a 500-candle dinner (“Count the candles!” says the staff).

The resort's meandering gardens are a treat, so be sure not to miss its signature garden cocktails like the Phou Vao Punch with Lao whisky and the Simply Lao made with hibiscus and sugar cane juice.

📍 Doubles start at US\$620+; www.belmond.com

ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG

The hilltop hotel is perched high above the ground and costs almost US\$1,500 (S\$2,048) per night, making it the pinnacle of Laos' luxury hotel scene. In Luang Prabang, the tents are a fascinating surprise, and you'll find the country's tribal and ethnic culture creatively displayed inside.

Bangkok-based architect Bill Bensley has masterfully incorporated indigenous artefacts in a contemporary setting filled with haunting images of Lao tribes. Each of the six tents reflects a different tribe, but No. 20 is the most captivating.

You will find a fanciful arrangement of exquisite lamps and lights of all types, but the highlight is a lantern hanging above your bed (which may indeed be the most luxurious bed you have ever slept on). Under a turquoise blue canopy, the lanterns look like a dazzling array of stars in the night sky.

As dusk falls, you can sip Lao coffee on your tent's alfresco terrace while mauve-misted hills yonder rise above fields of vibrant grass. Below you, the hill cascades down and is lush with plants, herbs and even a vegetable patch supplying the kitchen.

Alternatively, relax in one of the pool villas tucked away in the hills. It's almost worth sacrificing the tent to have breakfast on your villa's stream-side private deck, where your pool basks in the sun.

Book Pool Villa 18, and you'll have easy access to the spa where glass panels frame a pulsating stream of flora below the spa beds. Enjoy the view as you submit your back to the capable hands of Ly, one of the best masseuses on earth.



PHOTO ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG



PHOTO ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG

ABOVE
A bird's eye view of the spa.

RIGHT
The terrace of the hilltop tent.

FAR RIGHT
The Great House.

OPPOSITE
Inside the Waterfall Pool Villa.



PHOTO ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG

The Elephant Bar, replete with elephant iconography, straddles the stream that runs through the property. By crossing it, you will reach the Great House, a colonial-era mansion wreathed in the lushest gardens in Luang Prabang. Elephant motifs dominate the Great House, too, reminding you that Laos was once known as the "Land of a Million Elephants".

Chef Sebastien Rubis shares stories about Laos with Royal Laotian cuisine that he pairs with some incredible, lesser-known, best-kept-secret brands of champagne.

📍 Doubles start at US\$768++; www.rosewoodhotels.com/en/luang-prabang



PHOTO ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG



PHOTO AVANI+ LUANG PRABANG

AVANI+ LUANG PRABANG

Designed by Adrian Zecha, it is one of the most brilliant hotels ever built. The hotel is a fortress of affordable exclusivity with 40 rooms, despite its apparent small size.

Students of architecture and design would benefit from exploring the ingenuity of the structure. Rooms border a stunning garden pool framed in sapphire blue.

From your bed, you can access your closet, desk, and dressing table. Straight lines, white and light colours, and the glass panelling opening onto a slim terrace. All contribute to an easing effect.

A single, all-day dining outlet serves as a restaurant, bar and lounge. Breakfasts and suppers are held in a courtyard-like precinct. The cherry tomatoes, which decorate the immaculate white walls, also find their way into the most delicious continental salads Luang Prabang offers.

📍 Doubles start at US\$380; www.avanihotels.com/en/luang-prabang



PHOTO AVANI+ LUANG PRABANG

TOP
The understated elegance of Avani+'s exterior.

ABOVE
Timber, rattan, and decorative tiles create a rich, layered interior.



3 NAGAS LUANG PRABANG - MGALLERY

The UNESCO-protected, 15-room heritage hotel is flanked by temples, cafes, and Luang Prabang's Night Market.

The Lamache House, built in 1898 to host the unofficial deliberations of the Royal Court, is on one side of the road. Today, this building houses the stately Almsgiving Suite with a majestic spiral staircase that occupies half the first floor, dark wood floors, and a four-poster bed.

Try Lao Lao Whisky Muan and Tamarind Margarita on the Lamache House's terraces, surrounded by mango trees.

Across the street, an outrageously red vintage Citroen stands outside the Khamboua House, built in 1903 by King Sisavangvong's counsellor. During Lao Nights, you can enjoy Laotian cuisine and cultural dances in the charming gardens on the Nam Khan River.

The third building adjoins Khamboua House and is where the hotel has its ice cream shop, so it must be one of the most important buildings of the hotel.

📍 Doubles start at US\$200; www.3-nagas.com

GOOD TO KNOW

Trails of Indochina does bespoke itineraries with six-day packages from US\$3,215 per person. www.trailsofindochina.com



PHOTO 3 NAGAS LUANG PRABANG

SOUTH LAOS



PHOTO LA FOLIE LODGE

LA FOLIE LODGE

The lodge, arguably the most famous hotel in South Laos, is owned by French aristocrat Antoine de Noailles. Located on an island accessed only by boat, it features all-wood cabins along the Mekong River.

The owner's villa, La Residence, is a few minutes drive away and is decorated in rustic tones with a quirky Boho-chic aesthetic in the French style. Paintings of Lao women adorn the two bedrooms stocked with de Noailles' excellent library.

Indigenous pottery and colourful weavings decorate the interior while glass panels span the length of the villa. Two bedrooms and the living room offer views of the riverbanks and smooth white sands of the Mekong.

The shack-style, timber restaurant with a two-tiered Laotian-style roof has no walls and features a swimming pool. The outdoor cocktail terrace is the most picturesque, facing the riverbed and surrounded by tall trees.

📍 Doubles at US\$250; www.lafolie-laos.com



PHOTO LA FOLIE LODGE

TOP
The tranquil swimming pool.



PHOTO LA FOLIE LODGE

LEFT
The lodgings are built on stilts like vernacular houses



PHOTO NAMKAT YORLA PA

SOUTH LAOS

NAMKAT YORLA PA RESORT

The resort is steeped in the architectural and cultural identities of the historic Oudomaxay region, making it a paradise for outdoor activities.

Modern fittings and artworks incorporate tribal elements, as shown in the enormous reception and lounge areas that evoke the atmosphere of a remote wilderness lodge.

Guests can stay in tents on the hills or in chic pool villas built across a gurgling stream. The villas have bathrooms as large as their bedrooms,

with a free-standing jacuzzi in the middle. However, the show-stopping feature is the terrace, with its wood-panelled walkways, exotic garden pavilions, and the sound of running water.

Besides the restaurant, which offers outdoor seating next to vast stretches of greenery, the spa also sits on a stream with tribal decor and offers massages with hot poultices. ■

📍 Doubles start at US\$140; www.namkatyorlapa.com



PHOTO NAMKAT YORLA PA

GOOD TO KNOW
Bangkok Airways flies daily to Luang Prabang. www.bangkokair.com.

EATERIES



PHOTO POPOLO

POPOLO

Thibault and Mao, a young French couple, operate this hip Mediterranean restaurant inside the most beautifully renovated heritage building.

He pours exciting cocktails, like the Pondicherry Splice, while Mao innovates tapas and hand-makes pizzas (try the Belle Burrata).

But delicate gnocchi and deconstructed lemon tart are true works of art.

www.popolo-cantina-convivial-restaurant.business.site



PHOTO MANDA DA LAOS

MANDA DA LAOS

This jazzy dining spot has beautiful lotus ponds and an extensive menu.

Behind the reception, a mural depicts Laos' declining tiger population, a powerful reminder of

the country's endangered wildlife.

The design elements of this restaurant convey a crucial environmental issue through provocative artwork.

www.mandadelaos.com

SATRI HOUSE

This charming architectural icon of the colonial era serves exquisite Laotian cuisine on seductive woven platters.

The owner of this heritage mansion lived

in Paris and ensures the mansion is infused with a certain French chic.

Several different styles can be found in the restaurant's interior, from

colonial to art deco, while the atmosphere is calm and oriental.

www.satrihouse.com