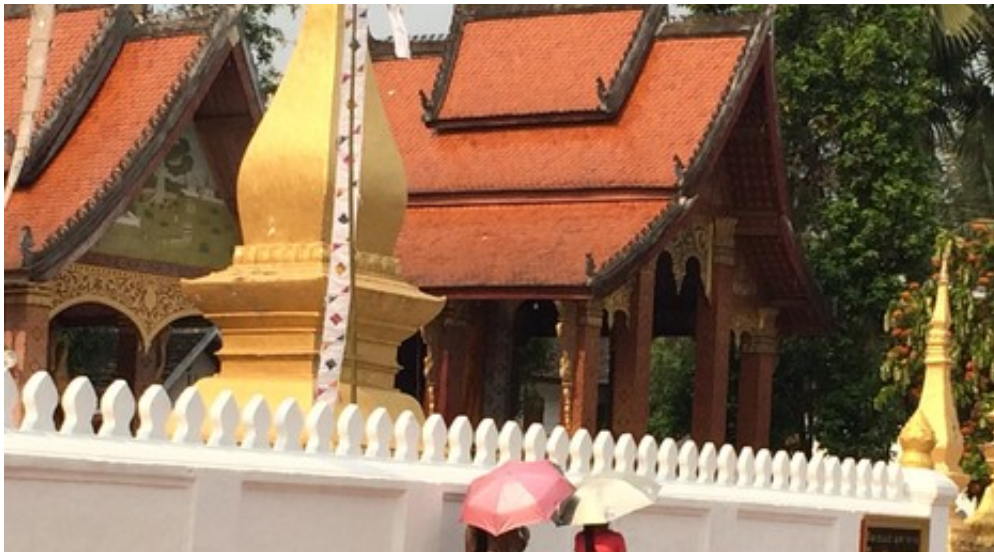


LEISURE / TRAVEL / BUDGET TRAVEL

Traveling back centuries through Laos

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Temple in Luang Prabang

Beverly Mann

Laos is a world of wild wilderness, white-water rapids, foamy waterfalls, and a wondrous array of underground [caves](#), where mountains and plateaus cover 70% of its natural landscape. An enchanting enclave unto itself, Laos is landlocked and bordered by Burma, Cambodia, China, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Known as the land of elephants, Laos has only about 500 still roaming the country. In Luang Prabang there is an Elephant Nature Park, a rescue and rehabilitation center for these animals. Many tourists bypass Laos, a jewel of [Southeast Asia](#). Such tour companies as Insider Journeys offer extensive and customized tours in the back villages and along the Mekong River, making overnight stops along the way to explore the ancient lifestyles of Laotians bonded by a strong

sense of family and community. Here are highlights of a small group tour with **Insider Journeys** featured in **two parts**.

Part I

Begin your sojourn on a tour boat down the great Mekong River, the seventh largest in Asia, stretching from Tibet into the South China Sea. The Laotian discovery begins in Chiang Khong. Pass endless miles of greenery, towering sandalwood and rosewood trees, scattered amid the massive mountainside, with no signs of activity for miles except for an occasional fisherman, cargo boat, or fish floating alongside.

The first sign of vibrant life is **Kamu Lodge**, an authentic eco-tourism and culturally responsible establishment which contributes part of its revenue to local community for improving quality of life. Replete with solar-powered safari-style tents and large mosquito nets draped above the beds, the lodge also serves food straight from the earth to table. In the immediate surrounding are the villagers of Kamu living a lifestyle of yesteryear in thatched huts with earthen floors, women working the surrounding rice patties, and fisherman net fishing for the family's dinner. You can participate in rice planting, casting fish nets, and even panning for gold, all while enjoying this luscious landscape and tropical paradise.

A short side trip takes you to the dramatic Pak Ou Caves carved into the limestone mountain at the edge of the Mekong. A steep staircase leads to the first of two caves. The lower cave has thousands of small Buddha statues placed by the locals, and the steeper, upper cave is dark with fewer statues.

Next stop is the lively town of **Luang Prabang**, a UNESCO World Heritage site. You can spend at least three or four days here. Sala Prabang is a comfy hotel in walking distance to most of the key sights. The city touts a tapestry of temples and French colonial architecture. For the mere cost of eight to ten dollars, you can walk away with a hearty, healthful meal of garden grown vegetables, jasmine rice, topped with the freshest seafood or herbed chicken anywhere along the main thoroughfare on Sisavangvong Road. Try Le Banneton, Blue Lagoon, Coconut Garden, or Tamarind Restaurant for starters.

Do not leave without seeing the 16th century Wat Xieng Thong, the most celebrated of Luang Prabang's temples. Pamper yourself with a massage at L' Hibiscus Massage, and take one of the many **yoga** classes listed at Ock Pop Tok Boutique or at www.luangprabangyoga.org. Only a 45-minute drive away, you can visit the spectacular **Kiang Si Falls** carpeting a mammoth mountainside, and bring a swimsuit to cool off in the refreshing waters. The café is a delightful place for a cappuccino or beer and tasty lunch.

Arrive back to Luang Prabang for a mindboggling night market, where an endless array of arts

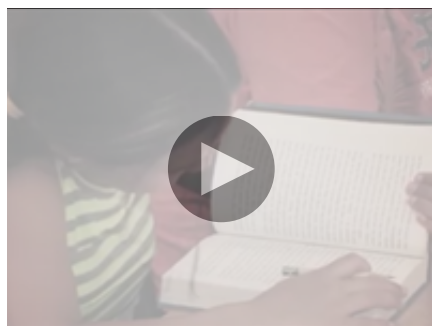
and crafts, clothing, et al is neatly displayed along the entire Sisavangvong Road.

To be continued in Part II

SUGGESTED LINKS

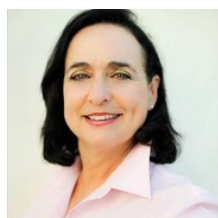
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