

How to Spend a Long Weekend in Laos' Temple Town

By Kirsten Raccuia

Once the royal capital of Laos, the small city of Luang Prabang is known for its remarkable Buddhist temples. Some shimmer with gold leaf, glass, and mirrored mosaic tiles, others are adorned with lavish paintings...and that's just the exteriors. Once inside, Buddhas are in abundance: sitting, standing, lying down, golden, wooden, bronze, alone, and in groups.

More than 1,000 saffron-clad monks and novice monks live in Luang Prabang. It's a temple town, sitting on the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, a splendid and stunning location. But if, after the 20th temple, you're a bit bleary-eyed, there's a lot more to do... You'll discover a laidback town brimming with culture and adventure, perfect for a long weekend getaway from any Southeast Asian retirement haven...

Friday: Your First Morning

Catch a cab from the airport for 50,000kip (about \$6) to your hotel in Luang Prabang's old town. Grab a map and head toward the tip of the old town area. Walk down Sakkaline Road, and you'll be treated to temples on practically every block. To enter one, you must have your shoulders and knees covered, so bring a scarf or sarong. The grounds of many temples have monasteries on them, so as you walk, you're likely to see young novice monks doing their daily chores.

Once you've had your fill of glittering temples and their flower-laden grounds, grab an outside table at Le Banneton (46 Sakkaline Road). Laos gained its independence from France in 1954, and the food has a definite Gallic twist. Freshly baked croissants and baguettes are as common for breakfast as traditional noodle soup, *khao piak sen*. Order a croissant or baguette with homemade jam and butter; better yet, try both.

Friday Afternoon and Evening

After you've fueled up, turn left out of Le Banneton and walk to Mount Phousi. At 492 feet, it's the highest peak in Luang Prabang, giving you a bird's-eye view of the old town's layout and all its peaked temple roofs. It's a 355-stair climb, but you can stop along the way and duck into a few temples to rest your legs. At the top is another temple, as well as locals selling birds in small woven cages; the Laotians believe that setting a bird free will bring you good luck and happiness. Find a spot on the top to relax



On the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, Luang Prabang is a laidback town full of culture and ripe for adventure.

and watch the sunset over Luang Prabang.

Go down the same set of stairs you came up and you'll end up on Sisavangvong Road (which turns into Sakkaline Road). Go right until you hit Sisavang Vatana Road and find Khaiphaen, a member of TREE training restaurants, a global alliance that teaches skills in the hospitality industry to marginalized or at-risk youth. Not only does the restaurant serve delicious, but you're also doing good by eating there; it's a win-win. The green curry with pumpkin, eggplant, and tofu (\$6) and the chicken and mint *laap* with roasted squash, green onions, chili, and lime (\$4.51) are both divine.

Saturday Morning and Afternoon

Walk along the Mekong toward the tip of old town, and you'll see the boat launch for ferries and day trips along the left side of the street. Negotiate the price for a day tour. We went to the traditional Lao Lao (locally made whiskey) and weaving villages and to the Pak Ou Caves and had lunch along the river. Not including lunch, it was \$46.36—cheaper than the price for two people to have a guided tour with a large group. Plus, we were able to go at our own pace.

Tip: If you start at the whiskey village, weavers are there, as well. No need to go to another village to see weaving unless you're very interested in the craft.

Once you return from your trip, head left along the Mekong for 200 to 300 yards, and you'll be at Wat Xieng Thong, one of Laos's most beautiful and significant

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temples and monasteries. It was one of the few that was spared destruction from the Chinese Black Flag Army in 1887, and until 1975 it was the site of coronation ceremonies for the king. If you are there at 5 p.m., you'll hear the monks chanting. It is magical to witness these monks chanting in unison. I felt as though I was spying on a ritual I wasn't supposed to be privy to, but it is open to anyone to watch.

Walk along the Mekong and grab a seat at any of the waterfront bars. Take in the sunset while having a large Beer Lao and *khai pan*, a local snack of flattened, seasoned river weed (\$2.74).

Saturday Evening

Head to the night market for dinner and shopping. It's not only the cheapest food in town; it's also fresh, plentiful, and delectable. Follow your nose to the cramped alleyway at the end of the market, where you'll find dozens of food stalls. A few communal tables are interspersed throughout, so you'll make some friends over dinner.

You can choose from a buffet of colorful cooked veggie and meat dishes for a few dollars, or pick a few types of meat and fish to be grilled. We got a whole grilled fish, a traditional sausage made only in Luang Prabang, another kind of sausage, sticky rice, two waters, and beer for two for \$6.28.

It's hard not to overindulge when everything looks and smells so fabulous. The communal tables come in handy, and because everyone over-ordered, we shared dishes with our new friends.

After dinner, do your shopping, but only until 10:30 p.m., when the market starts to shut down. You'll find authentic artisan crafts...handmade silver jewelry made by the local Hmong tribe...scarves and everything produced in the weaving villages...even painters creating their next work of art while waiting for a sale.

Sunday: Your Third Morning

Every day, as the sun rises, you'll hear drumming from the nearby temples. It's the monks' alarm clock, so they can start their day with the alms-giving ceremony. As the monks pass through the

streets with baskets, the locals give them sticky rice, so they have food for the day. It can be a moving ritual to witness, and it is an important part of the town's Buddhist traditions. Watch from a respectful distance, but don't participate unless you are Buddhist. Find a Laotian person giving alms on a small side street and wait there for the monks to walk by.

Afterwards, walk to the morning market and make your way through the maze of stalls selling their produce, fish, and beef on mats on the ground. The crowds thin out as you get deeper into the market, and that's where you'll find the soup ladies' stalls; pick the busiest one and sit down.

It's chilly in the morning, so traditional pork soup noodles—*khao soi*, brimming with chilis and mint—for \$2.45 is the ideal meal. If you happen upon someone making coconut balls, buy some and dig in while they're hot; they are the perfect steaming bite.

Since the day starts so early, you'll finish breakfast with plenty of time to walk to the Royal Palace Museum, or Haw Kham. As you leave the market, walk toward Sisavangvong Road, turn left, and you'll see the majestic palace. It was rebuilt in 1904 for King Sisavangvong after it was destroyed in 1887. It is a great place to get a feel for what life was like for a king, and the grounds

are lovely. It is closed daily from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., and you'll need an hour or two to explore.

Sunday Afternoon and Evening

Rent a scooter or take a *tuk-tuk* out of town to the Kuang Si waterfalls. The 18.6-mile drive is on just one road, so you can't get lost. As you leave the city, the landscape transforms into lush greenery, and you'll see what local life is like outside the tourist hot spot. The entrance fee to the waterfalls is 20,000kip, about \$2.40, which includes a walk through the Free the Bears Sanctuary.

After the bears, walk along the dirt path toward the falls. The rushing waterfalls are tucked in between dense green jungle, each tier getting higher and more intense. The pools are flat and iceberg-blue, with large smoothed boulders jutting out of them. The highest is a 197-foot fall that can be climbed on either side.

The left side is an easier climb; be sure to bring sturdy shoes for the hike. Although it's only a 40-minute climb, it's straight up a narrow dirt path. After the falls, there is a butterfly farm that you can visit on the road back to Luang Prabang.

For dinner, head to Tamarind. It offers incredible tasting menus that will take your taste buds on a journey. We tried the adventurous menu (\$25.84), which meant more than three hours of eating bat, worms, and fish stomach: certainly not for the faint of heart. But far easier on the palate and wallet is the set dinner menu (\$14.44), which is seven courses of local specialties and includes a homemade infused Lao Lao shooter.

After stuffing yourself at Tamarind, go for an after-dinner drink. Take a right out of the restaurant and enjoy a leisurely stroll along Kingkitsarath Road for about a quarter of a mile. After the Saynamkhan River View Hotel, make a right, and you can choose your poison: Ikon Club for fun craft cocktails or Chez Matt for a glass of wine. Either way, it's a perfect end to your weekend getaway. ■

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Less than 20 miles from the Luang Prabang, the waterfalls at Kuang Si are a lush oasis of calm and an easy daytrip from the city.