

# 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 there are Buddhas in abundance: sitting, standing, laying 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 get 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 Morning

Catch a cab from the airport for 50,000Kip/\$8.25 to your hotel in the old town of Luang Prabang. Grab a map and head towards the tip of the old town area. Walk down Sakkaline Road and you'll be treated with temples practically every block. To enter one, you must have your shoulders and knees covered so bring a scarf or sarong. The grounds of many of the temples have monasteries on them so as you are walking 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 have fuelled up, turn left out of Le Banneton and walk to Mount Phousi. At 150 metres, it's the highest peak in Luang Prabang, giving you a bird's eye view of the layout of the old town and all its peaked temple roofs. It's a 355-stair climb, but you'll be able to 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 provide you with good luck and happiness. Find a spot on the top to relax and watch the sunset over Luang Prabang.

Make your way down the same set of stairs you came up



The night market is the perfect place to eat and has some of the best selections of crafts in Southeast Asia.

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 marginalised or at-risk, youth skills in the hospitality industry. Not only is it a delicious restaurant, but you're also doing something good by eating there; it's a win-win. The green curry with pumpkin, eggplant and tofu (\$7.90) and the chicken and mint laap with roasted squash, green onions, chilli and lime (\$5.93) were both divine.

## Saturday Morning and Afternoon

Walk along the Mekong towards 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 whisky) and weaving villages and the Pak Ou Caves and had lunch along the river. Not including lunch, it was \$61—cheaper than two people doing a guided tour with a large group, plus we were able to go at our

own pace.

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

As soon as you return from your trip, head left along the Mekong for 200 to 300 metres and you'll be at Wat Xieng Thong, one of the most beautiful and significant temples and monasteries in Laos. It was one of the few that was spared destruction from the Chinese Black Flag Army in 1887 and up until 1975 was the site of coronation ceremonies for the King. If you are there at 5 a.m. you'll

“Set a bird free to bring good luck.”

hear the monks chanting as they do in every temple every day. It is the most magical feeling to witness these monks all chanting together in unison. I felt like 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 (\$3.60).

### Saturday Evening

Head to the night market for dinner and shopping. It's not just the cheapest food in town, it's 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. There are a few communal tables interspersed throughout, so you'll make some friends over dinner. You can choose from a buffet of colourful 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 only made in Luang Prabang, another kind of sausage, sticky rice, two waters and beer for two for \$8.26. It's hard not to over-indulge 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, it's time to get your shopping done but only until 10:30 p.m. when the market starts to shut down. It's one of my favourite markets in Southeast Asia. You'll find authentic artisan crafts...handmade silver jewellery 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 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



Visit bears and butterflies and relax at the Kuang Si Falls on a day trip from the city.

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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 respectable 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 is 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 chillies and mint, for \$2.45 is the ideal meal. If you happen upon someone making coconut balls buy some and dig in while they are hot; they are the perfect steaming bite.

Since the day starts so early, you'll be done eating breakfast with plenty of time to walk to the Royal Palace Museum, or Haw Kham. As you leave the market, walk towards 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., 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 30-kilometre 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 of the tourist hotspot. The entrance fee is 20,000kip/\$3.25 which includes a walk through the Free the Bears Sanctuary.

After the bears, walk along the dirt path towards 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 60-metre fall that can be climbed on either side. The left side is an easier climb and be sure to bring the proper shoes for the hike. Although it is only a 40-minute climb, it is 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. They offer incredible tasting menus that will take your taste buds on a journey. We tried the adventurous menu (\$34) 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 (\$19) 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 walk along Kingkitsarath Road for about 400 metres. 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. ■

**Editor's Note:** From her base in Penang, Malaysia, *IL* Southeast Asia Correspondent, Kirsten Raccuia, explores everything the region has to offer. You can contact her directly by email at: [Southeastasia@internationalliving.com](mailto:Southeastasia@internationalliving.com).