



Lively Side of
LAOS

Avani Luang Prabang is where you want to return after splashing about waterfalls or traipsing round temples Writer Stephanie Shiu



Last time I visited Luang Prabang, it poured with rain the whole time so my memories are of hours spent at cafes curled up with a book and tea with condensed milk. I was excited for the chance to see more this time round and discover its more action-packed side. It's reassuring that nearly five years on the UNESCO World

Heritages Site retains its sleepy charm, and that being situated in the heart of town doesn't feel at all overwhelming.

Avani Luang Prabang is smack back in the middle of the action yet still offers serenity with its calm-inducing minimalist, understated design. You're literally steps away from shops, cafes and both the morning

(culinary finds abound) and night market – where you'll find locally woven bags and jewellery crafted from the aluminium of bombs from the Secret War. There's history at every turn, including the boutique resort itself which was once the site of the French officer quarters, hints of which can be seen in its neo-classical architecture.

EASY REACH

If you're up to a 5.45am start, you can experience the ancient tradition of alms giving at sunrise. A ritual dating back to the 14th century, locals prepare food and wait roadside for the roughly 200 monks who make the procession from various temples. The hotel makes it a seamless experience with a cushion for you to kneel on as you wait. Staff ensure you are modestly covered as a sign of respect, teaching you to dole out the appropriate amount of sticky rice with a clean hand, and offer to take photos from a distance, without a flash of course.

The morning vinyasa class is not the resort cookie-cutter format yogis might turn their noses up at. Sansany offers plenty of modifications depending on level and ensures we are all comfortable being corrected at the start. Some of the students aren't even staying here – always a good sign – and part of the proceeds of each class are donated to The Language Project, a charity creating and supporting libraries in underdeveloped areas.

For a 360-degree views of Luang Prabang, head to Phousi Mountain, 150m above the skyline and a climb of 300 steps to the top. There are plenty of spots to take a breather under banyan trees, or make offerings at temples on the way up. It's a popular place to watch the sunset and usually busiest then. Back in town, get a taste of local life at Heuanchan Heritage House, a wooden building where you can browse Laotian textiles, learn about the region's ethnic minorities, customs and culture, including how the ubiquitous sticky rice is produced.

You can find this amongst other local fare at Avani's Main Street Bar & Grill. There are some similarities in dishes like papaya salad to the Thai version, but here the strips are thicker and generally more spicy. My favourite were the *sai ou*, grilled pork sausage, and *nam khao*, a crispy rice peanut and coconut warm salad. Mango sticky rice seemed an apt way to finish, coloured green from pandan and served with a dollop of ice cream.



PREVIOUS PAGE: The serene pool is the hotel's literal and figurative heart. THIS PAGE: Take in street life from the Main Street Bar & Grill. OPPOSITE PAGE: The lobby is a light and airy space to gather



Animal fun continues at the Laos Buffalo Dairy, also mere minutes away, perfect for toddlers who can hands on feeding not only buffalo but also rabbits, pigs, as well as calves from oversized milk bottles. But more than that, the socially responsible enterprise makes artisanal yogurt, cheesecake and ice cream, all of which can be sampled at the on-site cafe, and who also supply the resort eatery with mozzarella, blue cheese and ricotta.

SERIOUS VIEWS

More encounters with furry friends await at the Free the Bears Fund rescue centre, an Australian wildlife-protection organisation which rescues and provides homes for endangered Asian black bears. This is located at the entrance to the most lauded

of Luang Prabang's attractions, Kuang Si Waterfall. Its three tiers lead to a dramatic 50m-drop before flowing down to azure pools below which are a picturesque place for a dip, or even a picnic by side. Sounds obvious but try not to swim too close to the top of the falls when taking photos or videos, as the current is stronger than it looks – take it from someone who knows and is consequently mortified.

With nothing more than a bruised behind (and ego) from tumbling spectacularly down the fall mid-snap, an ideal hiding place in which to recover from the embarrassment is the AvaniSpa, where the 90-minute Avani Signature Treatment made everything right again. Not only did the spa manager and therapist spas deliver a nurturing treatment, but went above and beyond offering to tend to my scrapes, and

gave me tiger balm to take back to the room for my neck, which however unnecessary was so appreciated.

A beautiful way to cap off any day is with a sunset cruise along the Mekong. As soon as you board, life slows a few notches, in sync with the boat idly making its way down the iconic river. You find your cares cast along with the anchor, a rare opportunity to be mindful, watching laundry being hung dry from stilted homes on the water's edge and children splashing about on homemade rafts, before meandering back to the reward of a sky tinged pink as the last rays of gold disappear behind low-laying hills. Life on its banks is a reminder of simple joys, nature's beauty and how being on the water can sometimes be all the therapy you need.

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WHOLESOME FUN

Luang Prabang is ideal for families and the surprising abundance of wildlife will go down a treat with the kids. One of the loveliest surprises was Kuang Si Butterfly Park, founded in 2014 as a breeding sanctuary for a kaleidoscope of species. Its manageable size makes it great for little ones, who can learn about the journey from caterpillar to chrysalis with real-life examples of each stage, the latter striking and resemble jewels. There's also a fish spa set in a pond for those brave enough to take a seat and get their toes nibbled.

Also close by is Luang Prabang Elephant Camp. The ex-working animals and their young are offered a sanctuary after logging camps around Laos where they were previously overworked and mistreated. The mahouts are visibly affectionate with the animals and passionate about passing on their knowledge to visitors on feeding, bathing – or even stay for a whole day on a course about caring for the incredible creatures.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Avani Luang Prabang offers calm in the very centre of town; Kuang Si Waterfall is a must. THIS PAGE: Take in sunset on the mesmerising Mekong River