



Rosewood

LUANG PRABANG

Bill Bensley turns storyteller, archivist and treasure hunter to summon the romance and intrigue of a bygone era.

Words: Neena Dhillon | Photography: © Owen Raggett (unless otherwise stated)

Auguste Pavie can be credited for almost single-handedly bringing the kingdom of Laos under French colonial rule in the latter part of the 19th century. First stepping foot on Indochina as part of Napoleon III's marine infantry, the intrepid Frenchmen returned to the region as a civil servant, exploring modern-day Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, learning local languages, and turning 'native' for a while in his bare feet and wide-brimmed hat. With the French government manoeuvring to gain control of territory surrounding the Mekong Valley, Pavie was appointed Vice-Consul to the royal capital of Luang Prabang in 1886, a position he used cannily

to gain friends among local rulers while frustrating Siamese attempts to unify the region. Having assisted in the rescue of King Oun Kham during an attack on Luang Prabang from external forces, Pavie spearheaded a campaign to bring Laos under France's protection, leading to its integration into Indochina by the turn of the century.

The first Commissioner-General of Laos has served as a muse to Bill Bensley and his eponymous studio throughout the design and build of Rosewood Luang Prabang. Intersected by Nahm Dong River, a Mekong tributary, the 2.2-hectare valley estate nestles within verdant tropical rainforest found just outside the UNESCO World Heritage



Above: At La Grande Maison, decorative arches frame views to the external landscape

Site – and is Rosewood Hotels & Resorts’ third opening in South-East Asia. When Bensley first saw the property and its chaotic collection of ramshackle buildings, he had no idea he would be reconstructing the estate ten years later under the strict guidelines of UNESCO and in close partnership with owner Rena Udomkunnatum, whose Thai family are behind the Burasari Group. “I love a site with history,” says Bensley. “We understood from locals that this little estate with all its quirky outbuildings could have been the property of Pavie. Of course, at the time, it would have taken travellers months, not days, to find this magical mountainous environment – home to King of the Laotian peoples and a French hill station of sorts for the most adventurous westerners.”

Reimagining the spirit of hospitality once shown by expatriate hosts, Bensley has conceived the estate’s masterplan around a turn-of-the-20th-century grand house, flanked by residential quarters including a handsome two-storey guesthouse, and enhanced by charming additions such as a bar crafted from a rickety elephant bridge that needed rebuilding. Masterfully blending Laotian temple architecture and French colonial style, La Grande Maison is a captivating sight, the wide eaves of the roof designed to deflect monsoon rains, decorative arches framing views to the external landscape, and the inner chamber bookended by two monumental fireplaces featuring hand-trowelled plasterwork by one of the design

studio’s fine artists. It is Bensley’s hypothesis that Pavie “loved being in Laos” so the grand house’s interior architecture carries hallmarks of Wat Xieng Thong temple, namely handpainted gold-leaf ceilings, fretwork panels and ornate doors. “I designed the sunny yellow leather furniture to complement the gold-leaf details, with tables given wooden tusk-like legs that just seemed right in the former land of a million elephants,” he explains.

Elephants are a repeating motif throughout the public spaces, a joyful reference to the wild herds that would have once roamed the forests here. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Elephant Bridge Bar, an open-air lounge awash with wooden carvings, dancing deities and counters painted to depict the historical episodes, stories and people who have shaped this land. There is even an illustration of a modern-day trio; owner Udomkunnatum and Bensley pictured with the resort’s Managing Director Elias Pertoft. More than 500 carved elephants march across beams and balustrades, with bar tables once more rising from eye-catching tusk legs. Located over the flowing tributary, the bar provides a vantage point to absorb the landscaping – something for which Bensley’s studio is world-renowned. A formal tropical garden around the grand house – which takes its cue from the French colonialists who cultivated a heady mix of colour, scent and architectural planting – contrasts with untamed jungle vegetation into which accommodation is embedded. Mention should be made



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Above & Opposite: Guestrooms showcase the craftsmanship of local artisans, while bathrooms feature cast iron bathtubs by Kohler

of the white sandstone-lined ‘Robin’s Egg’ resort pool from which the estate’s forest-enveloped setting is best absorbed.

In addition to Bensley’s own artists, local artisans have been employed for their craftsmanship in painting and carving, as well as the laying of neat brick paths that link the accommodation. Rosewood Luang Prabang is the first resort for the brand to offer luxurious tented villas, six of which are built on stilts around the hilltop with connecting pathways punctuated by rope bridges. Foundations have been laid painstakingly by hand to avoid grading of the steep slopes, thereby preserving the natural landscape. “It always is the main challenge,” notes Bensley. “To build with minimal intervention to nature is paramount, and is what we do and what we stand for.”

The 75m² tents take their inspiration from six Laotian hill tribes – Hmong and Lahu among them; the ethnic fabrics of each employed as decorative lining, patterns and palettes for the interiors. Handwoven textiles, costumes and photographs representing each tribe are integrated into the tents for a strong individual identity, with ceiling lanterns, local slate and gold-leaf painted room dividers cocooning bathrooms. An innovative composite material has been used for exteriors with sizeable balconies affording uninterrupted views.

Accommodation down the hill consists of rooms, suites and villas, but Bensley’s studio has, once more, ensured that each is distinctive by paying homage to personalities whose past is inextricably linked

with Laos. Sure, there are common aspects – local hardwood for villa construction, a tile pattern approved by UNESCO for bathroom décor, oversized daybeds and antiqued mirror panels forming the architectural language of interiors – but every room is also adorned with a selection of historical objects that speak of their particular muse. “Genuine artefacts, found objects, documents and newspaper clippings associated with travellers of the time were sourced over a year by combing through specialty bookshops, antiques stores and vintage-ware collections across France,” Bensley reveals.

Of course, there’s a Riverside Villa dedicated to Pavie. One can browse an original family document from 1656 written on parchment of pig skin, Laotian maps of the period, vintage trunks bearing his name, a portrait of the hardworking gent, pages from his journal and a pair of architectural temple decorations mounted on marine topography maps to represent his cultural immersion. Famed French naturalist Henri Mouhot has a suite dedicated to him, as does the relatively unknown architect Ernest Hébrard, whose city-planning work in French Indochina is alluded to by drawings from his university projects and a 1908 cigarette paper collection showing France’s prominent architects. Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma is honoured; so too are Kings Sisavang Vong and Oun Kham.

Before the hotel’s launch, Bensley stayed on the top floor of the guesthouse, opening all the doors joining the bays of the suites and



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Above: Rosewood Luang Prabang is the first resort for the brand to offer luxurious tented villas, six of which are built on stilts around the hilltop

rooms. “Until midnight I walked between the multifarious quarters moving furniture, hanging pictures and making notes,” he recounts. “It was then that I realised this lovely house is a smaller version of French palaces by way of its enfilade layout that connects the entire floor but can be closed for privacy. It’s an old but new way of planning, with the potential to be popular among groups travelling together.” As such, Maison Nahm Dong has inviting communal living spaces, including a room dedicated to King Kham Souk, the red walls enlivened by illustrations of Laotian nature and the dining table finished with brass corners recalling the multi-layered umbrellas favoured by royalty. Foyers in turn are paved in a mosaic of circular coloured mirrors, influenced by temple walls.

Perhaps the most delightful suite is devoted to the unusual French pairing of Mrs Brohy and Miss Ohnier, the first females to participate in the one and only croquet competition held as part of the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris. Memorabilia includes mallets hung above the beds and a pictorial collection of French athletic figures. A painting by a Bensley artist cheekily imagines the duo playing on the lawn of La Grande Maison while the cobalt bathroom boasts

a sunken bathtub and rhino horn hooks. Accent colours of blue and green throughout the rooms mirror exotic shades seen in the indigenous flora, fauna and butterflies flitting around the estate.

While much of the accommodation benefits from outdoor space, the six waterfall villas come with generous decks and private pools overlooking the river. Water forms a soundtrack to these standalone homes, which pay homage to the six men involved in the Mekong Expedition of 1866-68, organised to assess the navigability of the river. The expedition’s members included botanist Clovis Thorel whose luggage doubles as a decorative detail of his villa, along with plant specimens framed on the walls. Bensley’s lighting fixtures are shaped to mimic the petals of a lotus flower while some of the villa’s handpainted walls took the studio’s artists days at a time to complete.

Expressed through authentic artefacts and memorabilia, these fascinating stories are interwoven through an estate whose design equally harnesses indigenous crafts and temple architecture, bringing evocative layers of detail to instil both a sense of discovery and place. The result befits this magical corner of the world, replicating the spirit of adventure that has always drawn intrepid visitors to Laos.

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT: 23 guestrooms, villas and tents | 1 restaurant | 1 bar | Swimming pool, spa | www.rosewoodhotels.com
Owner: Rena Udomkunnatum | **Operator:** Rosewood Hotels & Resorts | **Architecture, Interior Design and Landscaping:** Bensley | **Lighting Design:** Dazzle