

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

OCTOBER 2018

A NEW TWIST ON
Luang Prabang

CHINA'S LAND
OF KARSTS

A BIENNALE
FOR BANGKOK

SRI LANKA'S
SOUTHERN GEMS

ACROSS THE
RIVER IN SAIGON

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FROM LEFT: Though currently laced in scaffolding, the Metropolitan Theater of Manila is set to reopen by 2022; an old photo of the Met's original stage.

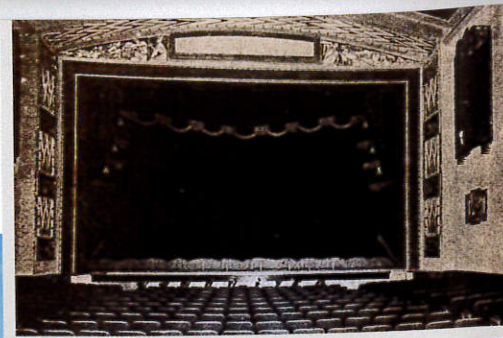
+ BASILICA MENOR DE SAN SEBASTIAN

Nestled on a quiet street in Manila's Quiapo district, the Basílica Menor de San Sebastián, the country's only steel church, is getting an overhaul. Underneath its magnificent beauty, rot has spread within the 127-year-old Neo-Gothic structure: misguided and heavy-handed improvements left columns partially submerged in water, resulting in corrosion; over time, paintings of religious icons on its walls and dome have faded or been destroyed by stains; and even a few holes dot the stained-glass windows.

Yet in spite of its deterioration, the building has proven to be the strongest among all of the churches that were built in the neighborhood: four places of worship were built here prior to San Sebastián, and earthquakes destroyed them all.

To try a different approach, the parish, managed by the Order of Augustinian Recollects, chose steel as the fifth church's foundation. The parish hired Spanish architect Genaro Palacios, who roped in Belgian contractor Société Anonyme de Travaux Publics, known for constructing the cars of the Orient Express, and the church was completed in 1891.

The sad state of the basilica prompted U.S.-educated conservator Tina Paterno in 2010 to launch the San Sebastián Basilica Conservation and Development Foundation to secure funding for its refurbishment. Almost 80 volunteers have been involved in the project so far, including the late Dr. Robert Baboian, a corrosion scientist who worked on



the restoration of the Statue of Liberty and was a former NASA consultant.

While San Sebastián is still functioning as a church, lack of funding has slowed its refurb. Paterno estimates the project will need another P400 million to finish, and the foundation is raising money by organizing tours and selling souvenirs and art pieces made from the rust scraped from the columns. *Pasaje del Carmen Street, Quiapo, Manila; visit fb.com/savessbasilica for tour information.*

+ METROPOLITAN THEATER OF MANILA

Spending the past few decades in a state of decay, the 87-year-old Metropolitan Theater of Manila was granted a P700 million restoration by the NCCA last year. Designed by Filipino architect Juan M. Arellano and inaugurated back in 1931, the 1,670-seat grand Art Deco venue hosted colorful Spanish *zarzuela* dances and Filipino versions of classic foreign operas.

After World War II bombings stripped the Met of its glory, former first lady and Manila governor Imelda Marcos pushed for a restoration, and by 1978 the Met was once again welcomed by the city's culturati. Marcos, however, had scandalously used the theater as collateral for a loan from the Government Service Insurance System; in 1986 she fled to Hawaii, leaving her debt unpaid and the Met foreclosed.

The property was eventually sold to the NCCA in 2015, and official restorations began last year to both modernize the theater and reconstruct original elements from Arellano's design—such as his original inner courtyard and the carved banana and mango reliefs—using old photographs and a copy of the initial plan as references. An elevator will be added to comply with modern building codes, and the wings will be converted into art galleries.

Expected to reopen in 2022, the Met marks the beginning of a larger rejuvenation of Manila. The arts venue will connect via an underground tunnel to other landmarks such as Intramuros and the Central Post Office, another Arellano-designed structure reportedly being targeted for adaptive reuse. *Padre Burgos Street, Ermita, Manila. +*

A New Temple in Town

From the balcony of her luxury tent above the forested hillside at Rosewood Luang Prabang,

Eloise Basuki gets a new perspective on the former capital of Laos, and finds there's plenty to discover beyond the town's heritage quarters. PHOTOGRAPHS

BY LEIGH GRIFFITHS



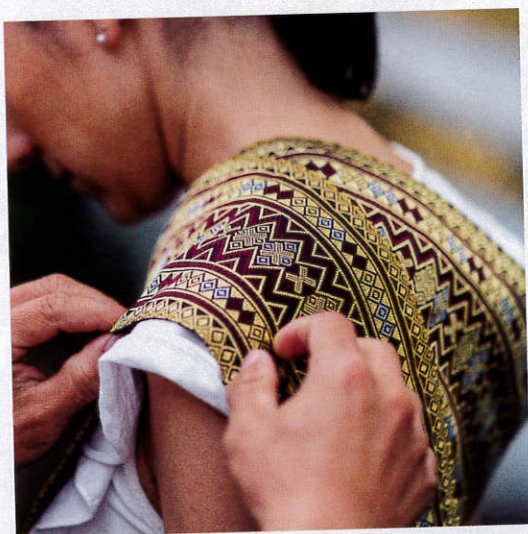
Rosewood Luang Prabang is set alongside its own private waterfall.



IT'S STORMING WHEN I ARRIVE at Wat Phnom at 5:30 a.m. to begin *tak bat*, the Buddhist tradition of giving morning alms. I join a huddle of locals taking refuge in the small temple six kilometers from the center of Luang Prabang with my guide Sommay, a former monk and now the excursion manager of the city's new Rosewood hotel. He pushes a woven basket of hot sticky rice into my hands, and we kneel on the floor as a stream of saffron-robed monks shuffle through the pavilion. So begins the daily merit-making process, pawing out fistfuls of the steaming rice to the procession of monks for their breakfast. I'm the only foreigner here, but the congregation hardly notices. In this well-trod tourist town it feels good to be invisible.

Driving back to Rosewood we pass the loud throngs of red-eyed tourists finishing up *tak bat* on the town's main drag—this alms-giving spot now avoided by locals, Sommay tells me—and I can't help but feel a little smug. Though no Instagram post marks my *tak bat* experience, Sommay has offered me a moment to slip into real-life Luang Prabang.

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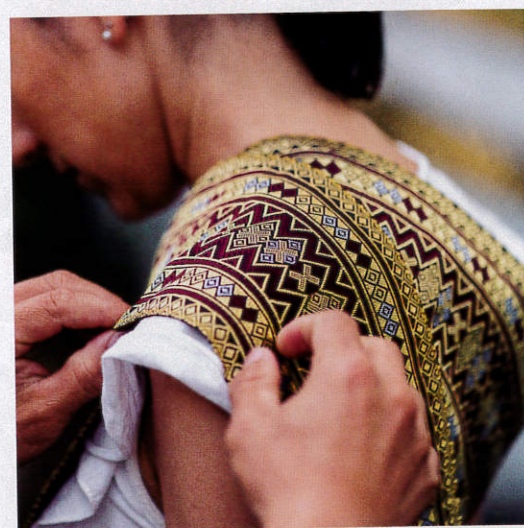


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Morning alms begin; a trip to Wat Phnom with Rosewood guide Sommay; Kuang Si falls, an oasis in the jungle; a scarf is worn during *tak bat* as a sign of respect.

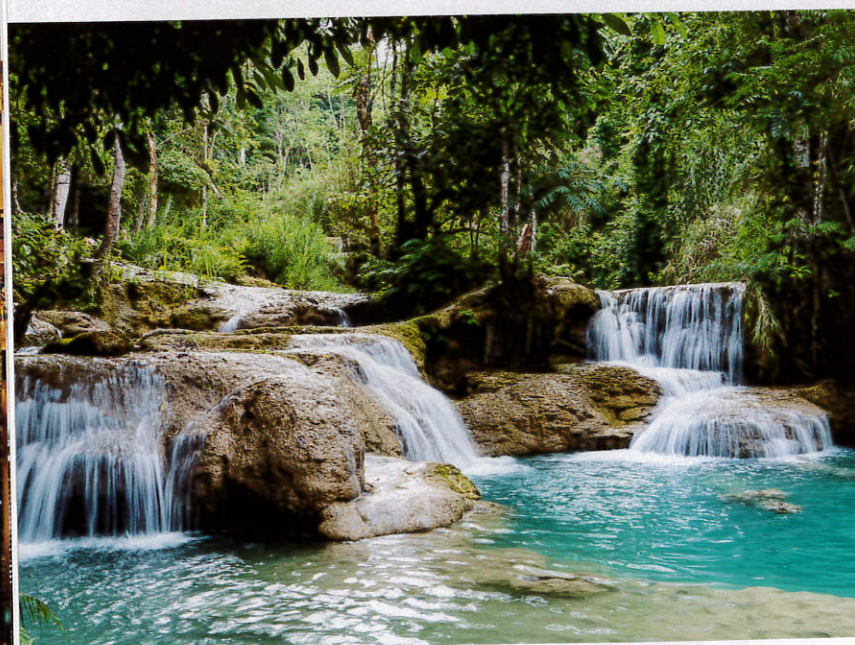




SPOTLIGHT



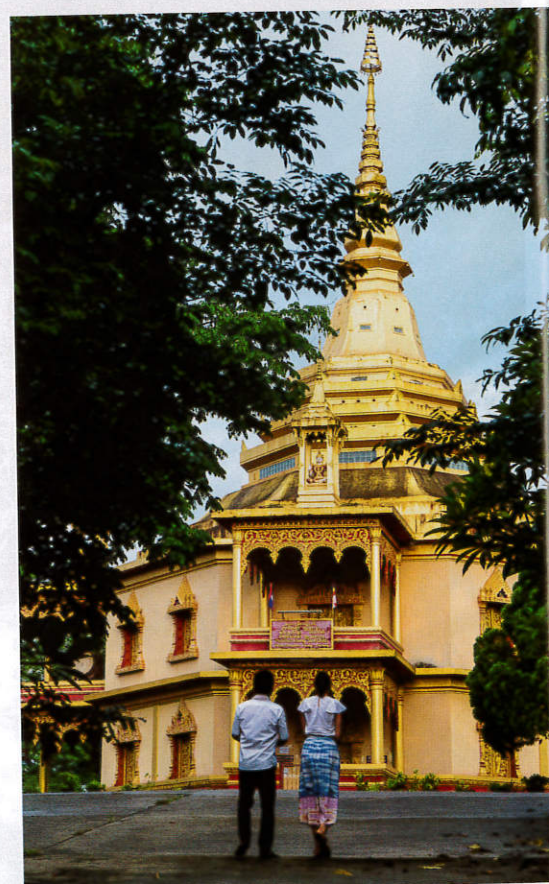
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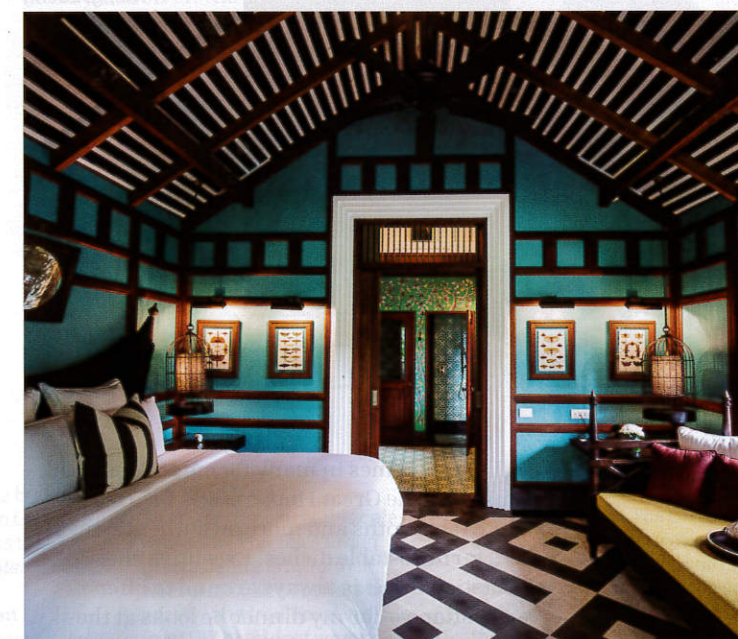
and grew 30-fold by 2017). It became a constant pillar on the backpacker trail, as tubers from Vang Vieng peaced out in the city of temples. Luxury names have cropped up throughout the decade, but the last two years has seen a recent spate—besides Rosewood, a Sofitel, an Azerai-turned-Avani, and a Pullman have opened—and with new refined eating and drinking locales, Luang Prabang is going through a rebrand of sorts. But it's not just about high-end hospitality—as the city expands beyond the protected old quarter that restricts new development, we're encouraged to explore a little further as well.

THE ROSEWOOD IS A 10-MINUTE drive from town, but the distance is a blessing, not a curse. The 23-room resort is set at the foot of a small waterfall in the Ban Nauea neighborhood, with no sightlines to civilization. The property has the magic touch of design legend Bill Bensley, whose studio developed everything from the French-Lao hill-station concept and The Great House open dining hall to the colorful interiors in every riverside or waterfall-view room, suite and villa.

My room is up in the clouds, in one of the six 75-square-meter hilltop tents perched above the property. It's a sweaty 100-step stairway to heaven, but it's hardly a trek: butterflies and birds flit along the paved walk through bamboo groves, banana palms and tamarind trees, and streams trickle below swinging suspension bridges leading to your tent.



Every room is inspired by personalities of the region: the Alix Aymé riverside villa mimics a studio of the French artist and friend of the Lao royal family; the botanical-themed Ernest Doudart de Lagrée pool villa honors the 19th century French-Mekong expedition leader and entomologist; hilltop tents are named after the region's hill-tribes. Mine celebrates the Lisu, a Tibeto-Burman highland tribe known for their colorful clothing. Dresses decorate the room, traditional patterns are hand-painted on walls and a tasseled headpiece stands above the bed, from which my tent window looks out to an oversized balcony and the green beyond below. I have reached traveler's nirvana.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Antique décor and signature Bill Bensley design in Rosewood's waterfall pool villa; handwoven scarves at Ock Pop Tok; *noor tchou*, a royal Lao bamboo dipping sauce at The Great House.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rosewood's Lisu hilltop tent at is decorated with tribalwear and Lao crafts; Wat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang's best-known monastery; mixing creative drinks at 525; beds in hilltop tents look over the jungle.



Luxury comes in many forms at Rosewood. Dinner at The Great House is less focused on white tablecloths and more on authentic royal Lao, farm-to-table dishes. Executive chef Sebastien Rubis is always around to offer suggestions—for my dinner he looks at the sky, contemplates the humidity, then selects a few signature dishes to suit: *oor lam gnoua*, a braised water-buffalo curry flavored with sakkhan root, and an off-menu but in-season wild mushroom soup. Sebastian, who has worked in kitchens across Southeast Asia for the past 16 years, sticks to traditional Lao methods, pounding all his pastes and sauces by hand, and fermenting local Mekong fish for the traditional *lon som* pink pork curry. “I don’t want to change Lao food—it’s not my culture. I prefer to protect tradition rather than create fusion,” he says. He’s also the man in the know for eating-out tips: lotus-lake views at Manda de Laos; his former workplace L’Elephant for French; Saffron for coffee; and upscale drinks at 525, a fledgling cocktail bar that is finally refining the way people drink in this town.

When I arrive at 525, a cloud has taken over the bar. General manager James Corrighan pours a fragrant smoke made from pomelo- and orange-infused hickory wood into my chili-inflected rum cocktail, testing flavors for their new 525 Experience menu. Since the bar opened in 2015, owner Andrew Sykes and James have been steadily elevating the original classic-cocktail menu to feature more experimental drinks you’d find in big-city bars. James says the aim is to create a space where everyone feels welcome—locals, tourists, expats—and it’s a world away from the Beer Lao and cheap rice-whiskey bars of the backpacker days.

AS A DEVOUT BUDDHIST AND FORMER monk for 8½ years, Sommay doesn’t join me for a drink, but opens up in other ways. “I’m not a guide that reads from a book, I just share my experience,” he says on a temple tour that explores long-lost shrines across the Mekong. He talks frankly about the impending Chinese high-speed railway that’s destroying much of the natural forest, and the loneliness of a recent six-month silent meditation. It was just after this solitude stint that Rosewood Managing Director Elias Pertoft approached him for the



job; Sommay spent three months developing the hotel’s core activities, talking to hill-tribe elders and village chiefs for approval. “Sommay introduces guests to villagers and shows their way of life,” Elias says. The goal is to make guests feel part of the culture rather than just observing—or, in the case of the overcrowded city-center *tak bat*, destructively interfering.

Tours that engage like this also help us better connect with take-home treasures. A popular souvenir stop in this city is at Ock Pop Tok, a fair-trade textile enterprise that supports local women weavers of Laos and the traditional craft; Rosewood’s tour adds an exclusive trip to the weaving village to meet the craftswomen, spin a silk-spool key ring and have a lesson on the loom.

On my last evening in Luang Prabang, Sommay takes me to Wat Choum Khong to observe the monks’ evening chants. The vibration of the hymns pulses through my chest, hypnotizing me into stillness. Outside the temple, the golden Prah-bang Buddha stands tall with both palms facing forward, a palladium of peace. Luang Prabang still embodies its namesake statue, and now there are even more places to seek the serenity. ☯

THE DETAILS

HOTEL

Rosewood Luang Prabang
The immersive riverside and waterfall-view rooms and hilltop tents are havens of comfort, culture and creativity. Hotel cars can drive you into town and also pick you up. A massage in the Sense Spa tent is a treat: face-holes in the heated massage beds peer through glass windows in the floor overlooking the rushing river below. rosewoodhotels.com; doubles from US\$820.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS

525
Snack on a tapas-style menu and sip pro drinks made with craft spirits like gin from Iron Balls in Bangkok or Australia’s Four Pillars, and rum by Laodi in Vientiane. 525cocktailsandtapas.com; drinks from US\$7.

Elephant Bridge Bar
Try classic cocktails with Lao ingredients at Rosewood’s own

bar that’s perched on a bridge over the rushing Nahm Dong River that flows across the property. rosewoodhotels.com; drinks from US\$7.

L’Elephant Restaurant
Housed in a 1960s colonial building, this French-focused eatery has been a mainstay in town for almost two decades. elephant-restau.com; mains from LAK110,000.

Manda de Laos
This third-generation, family-run Lao restaurant blends legacy and innovation with dishes like mix-it-yourself *laap moo*, and coconut crème brûlée. Request a seat beside the lotus pond. mandadelaos.com; mains from LAK60,000.

Saffron
Go for brunch, order the mango-coconut French toast, a cup of the best coffee in town, and watch the river glide by. saffroncoffee.com; mains from LAK30,000.

Silk Road Café

The diverse menu at this café within Ock Pop Tok’s Living Crafts Centre is by former weaver chef Keo. It offers both healthy and traditional options, from DIY betel-leaf wraps and rice-paper rolls to the Weavers’ Lunch: bamboo soup, Lao sausage and sticky rice. Tables overlook the Mekong. ockpoptok.com; mains from LAK29,000.

The Great House

Sebastien’s authentic menu is full of rarely found royal Lao dishes. Breakfast offers Western comforts but also tasty local fare—go for *khao soi*, a typical Lao minced pork-noodle soup. rosewoodhotels.com; mains from US\$6.

ACTIVITIES

Rosewood Experiences

More explorer than guide, Sommay can take guests to authentic *tak bat*; the paper-making village Ban Sangkong;

neighboring Nadueay farm, the source of many of The Great House’s ingredients; treks to meet the Khmu and Lao Lum hill-tribes; a chance to sit down with the founders and play with the rescued pachyderms of MandaLao Elephant Sanctuary (mandalaotours.com); a visit to the sky-blue Kuang Si falls; and more. rosewood.com.

Ock Pop Tok

As well as two boutiques on Sakkaline Road, the Living Crafts Centre in Ban Saylom offers free guided tours of the weaving workshop, as well as half- to three-day courses that teach traditional dyeing techniques and how to weave your own scarf. ockpoptok.com.

Trails of Indochina

A half-day walking tour takes in the city’s heritage architecture and temples, including the glittering mosaic-adorned Wat Xieng Thong temple. trailsofindochina.com.