

M A G I C A L L A O S

*With its splendid riverside location, enriching cultural programme and myriad sybaritic pleasures, Rosewood Luang Prabang casts a spell over **Jakki Phillips***

Photography **CHRISTOPHER WADSWORTH**

Rosewood Luang Prabang's guest experience manager used to live in a cave. For one year Sommai Saiyavong undertook a silent retreat in a rocky hideaway high in the mountains above the former royal capital of Laos. In his quest for enlightenment, the 29-year-old did not speak, read, write or communicate in any way, existing in total isolation, sustained only by donations of sticky rice and fruit from local villagers. This spiritual solitude was part of Saiyavong's training to become a Buddhist monk, an apprenticeship he started in a monastery when he was only 12.

Rosewood Luang Prabang's managing director, Elias Pertoft, first encountered this devout young Buddhist in late 2017, several months before his property was due to open. The two men were living very different lives. Saiyavong's austere existence eventually took its toll and, after falling ill, he ended his religious training, moving from his cave to a hut in the forest near Rosewood Luang Prabang. Although no longer a novice monk, he still followed the teachings of Buddha, visiting monasteries daily and undertaking long walking meditations in the countryside where he befriended local villagers and hill tribes.

Pertoft was living on-site at Rosewood, a beautiful Bill Bensley-designed resort 10 minutes outside the historic Unesco World Heritage-listed city. A far cry from Saiyavong's jungle shack, this slice of paradise is cradled in a peaceful valley along the banks of a mountain stream, with only 23 residences ranging from luxurious hilltop tents to riverside pool villas overlooking gentle waterfalls.

The two men connected over their shared passion for preserving and promoting the culture of the region. Pertoft had been seeking someone to curate unique guest experiences in keeping with Rosewood's Sense of Place philosophy—that each property should

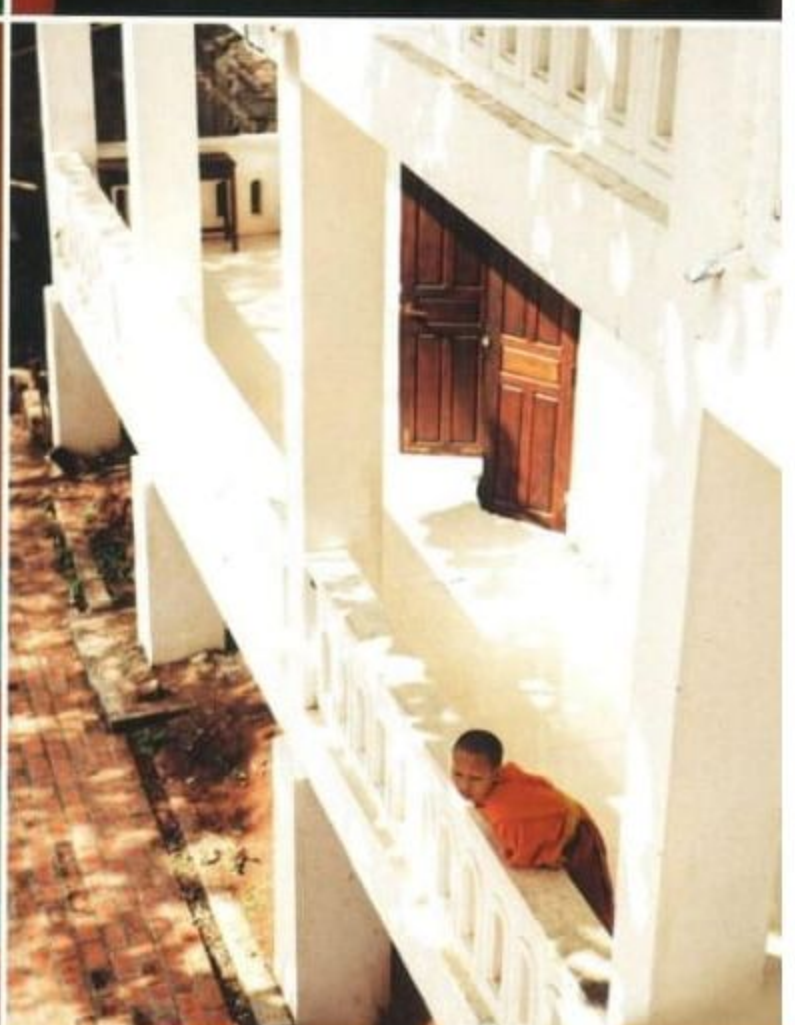
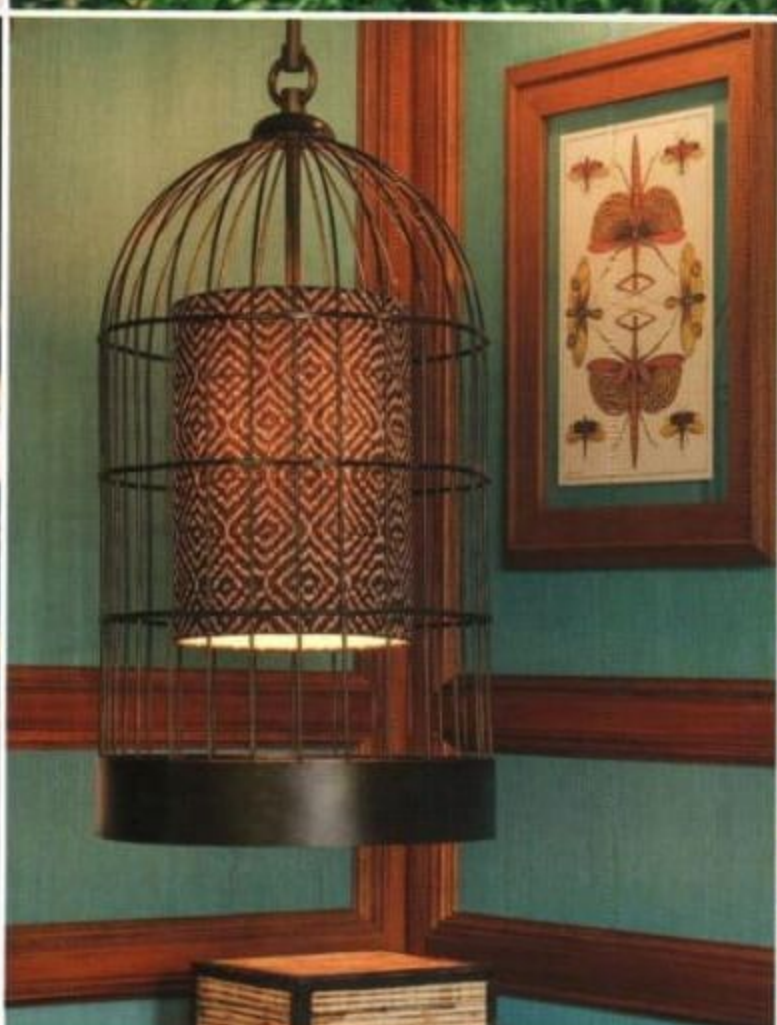
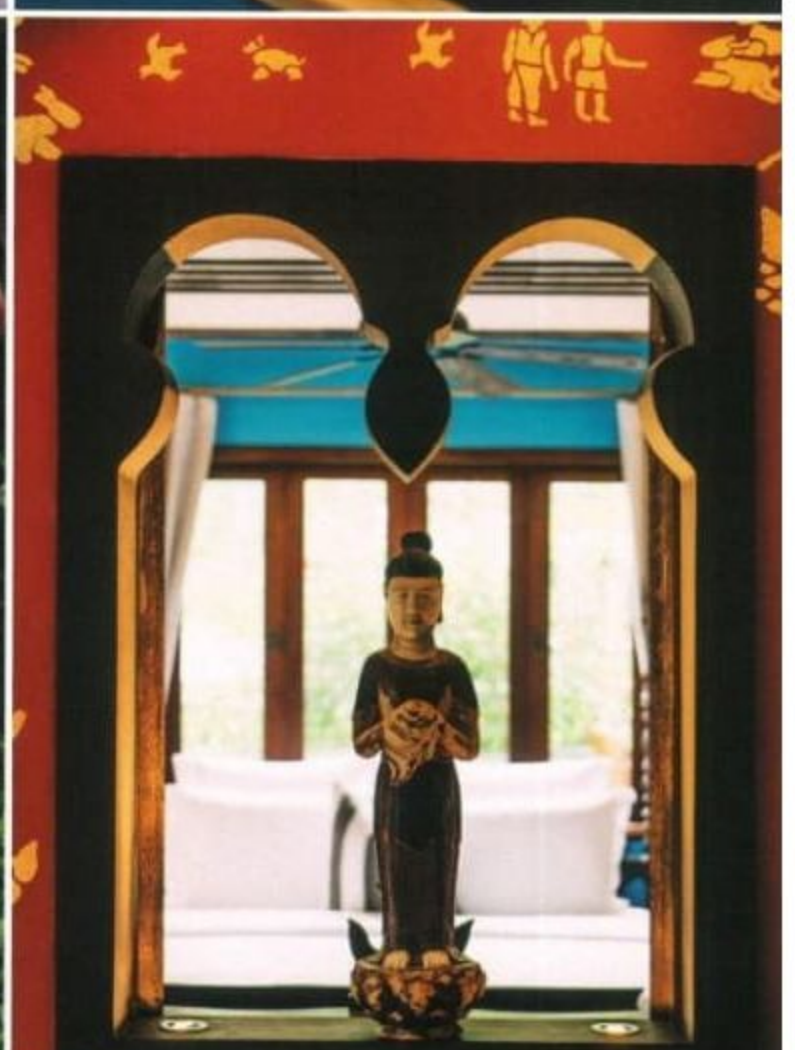
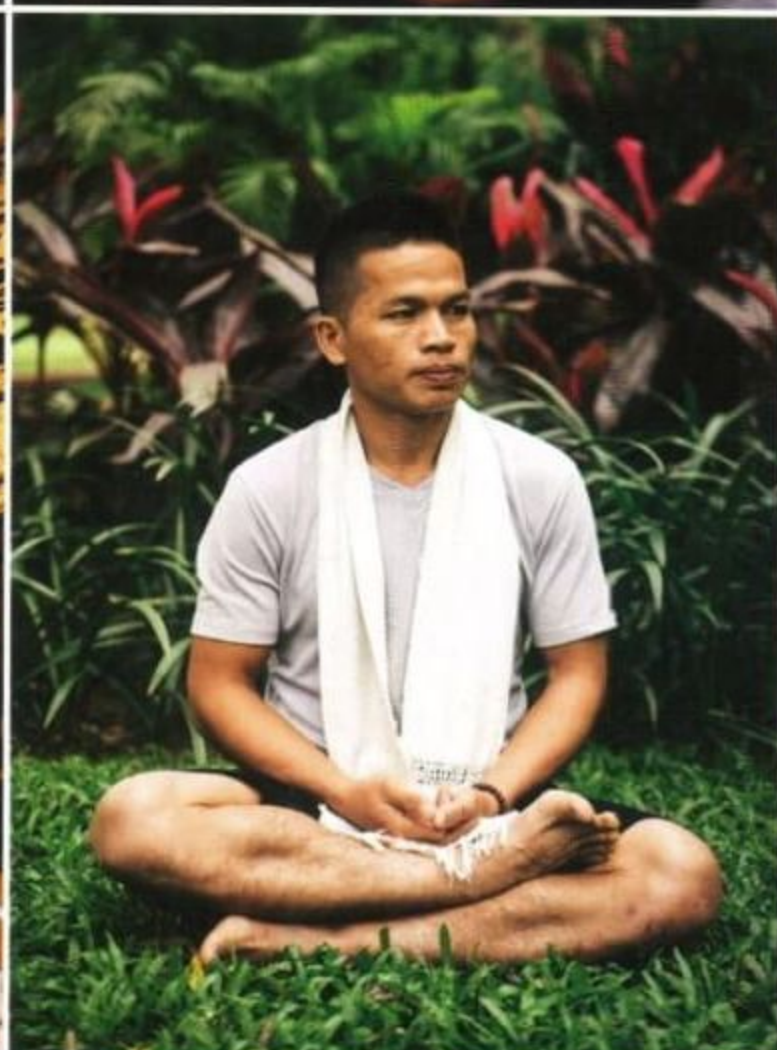
reflect its location, history, people and traditions. Saiyavong was eager to share his knowledge of Buddhism and show visitors the real Luang Prabang, not just the well-trodden tourist trail.

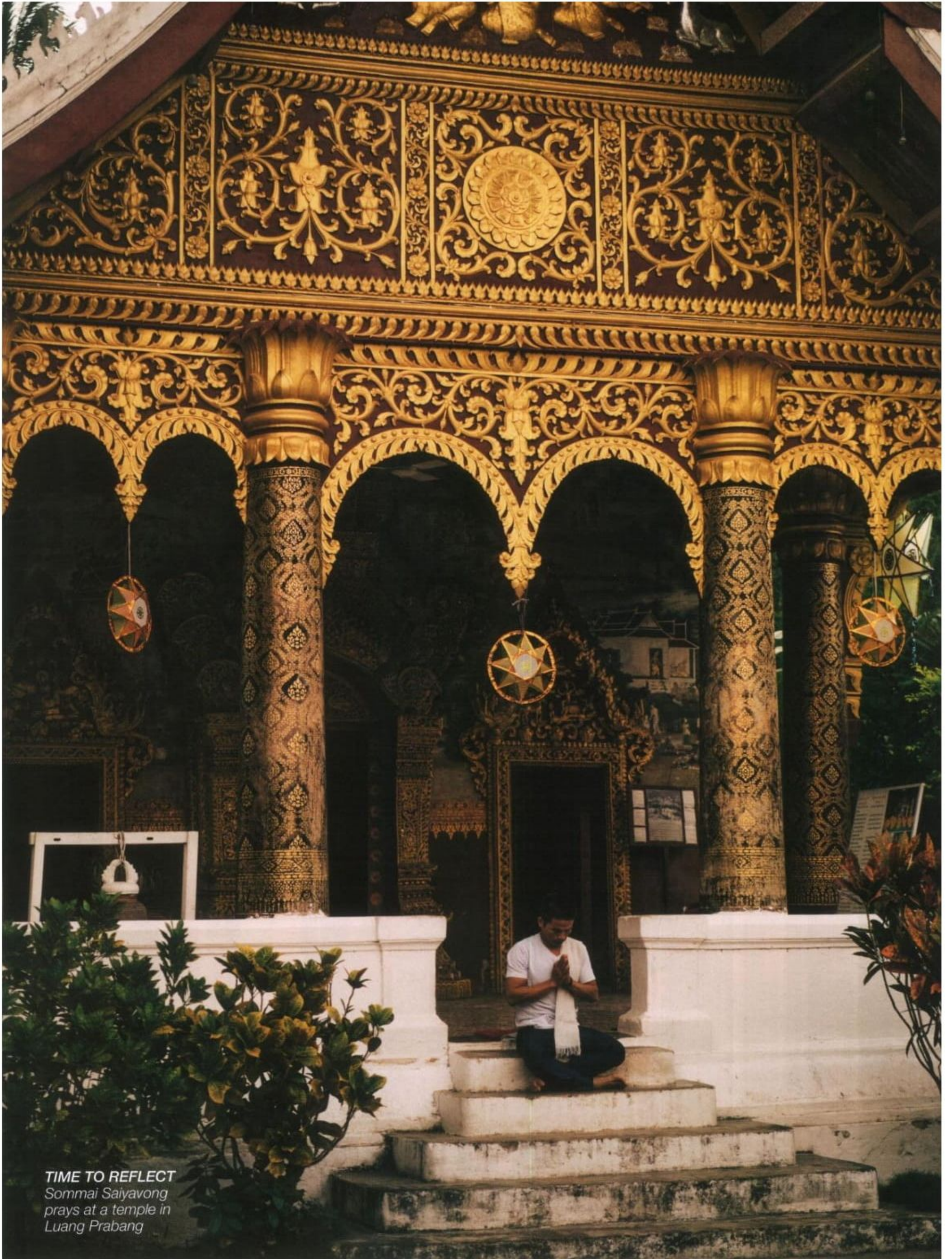
It's hard to imagine Saiyavong as a monk, let alone a silent one. With his chiselled cheek bones, spiky hair and cheeky grin, this charismatic young man wouldn't look out of place in a Laotian boy band. He certainly turns heads. As we explore the region together as part of my five-day stay at Rosewood Luang Prabang, I notice young women smiling coyly and whispering as my guide walks by. "My family want me to get married and have children," says Saiyavong. "They beg me not to go back to my silent existence, but I have to follow my heart and my heart tells me that at some point in my life I must return to the monastery, forever."

But until that fateful day, Rosewood guests are blessed to have this deeply spiritual young man introducing them to rare encounters spanning sunrise swims in secret waterfalls, candle-lit chanting in forest temples and even the chance to drink Laotian rice whisky with hill tribe elders as they recite ancestral stories around the fire.

My most memorable adventure was the opportunity to accompany Saiyavong and members of a local NGO, the Buddhist Heritage Project, on a journey along the mystical (if not a little murky) Mekong to present a gold Buddha statue and a cash donation to a remote jungle monastery. The funds will help build a college within the temple complex to teach Buddhist arts and crafts to novice monks. Many ancient artisanal skills such as bronze casting, gold leaf stencilling, mural painting and wood carving are on the verge of extinction in Laos due to young people favouring jobs in tourism over traditional arts and crafts. As a result, Buddhist temples and monuments are falling into disrepair, with no one to maintain the old or build the new.

IMAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HILLTOP TENT; HMONG HERBAL POULTICE; LAOTIAN HERBS AND SPICES; RIVERSIDE VILLA; THE SCHOOL FUNDED BY THE BUDDHIST HERITAGE PROJECT; WATERFALL POOL VILLA (COURTESY OF ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG); BUFFALO SAUSAGES WITH CHILLI JAM; BUDDHIST TEMPLE; SOMMAI SAIYAVONG





TIME TO REFLECT
Sommai Saiyavong
prays at a temple in
Luang Prabang



SACRED PATHWAY
Novice monks
await the arrival of a
Buddha statue

“We’re greeted by the sight of around 60 monks silently congregated on the riverbank wearing bright saffron robes”

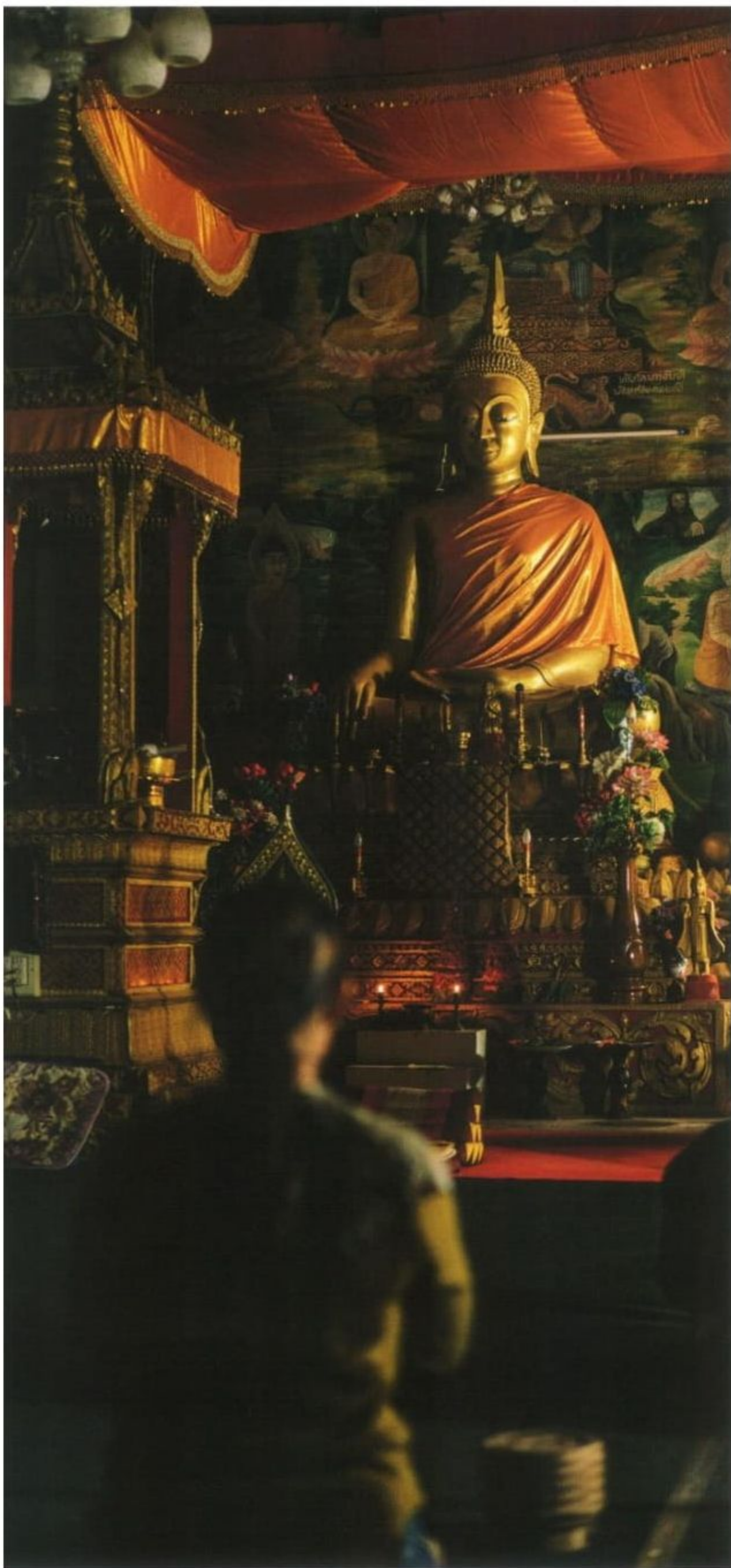
After a 45-minute cruise from Luang Prabang in a traditional long-tail boat, we are greeted by the sight of around 60 novice monks silently congregated on the riverbank, their bright saffron robes a bolt of fiery colour blazing through the tangled green jungle. We disembark with our divine figurine, which is placed on a ceremonial palanquin under an ornate umbrella and carried by the novices up slippery mud steps into a thicket of towering palms. Our procession is silent apart from the solemn sounding of a gong marking our slow progress through the trees and up a gentle incline to the main temple.

On arrival at the monastery, shoes are removed, ceremonial scarves are hung around our necks and we sit, heads lowered, in front of the rotund, ruddy-cheeked abbot. After accepting our donation, he chants, blessing us and golden bowls of water that we are instructed to take outside and pour on the surrounding garden as an exchange of good karma.

A thundering gong heralds the end of the ceremony and we bow our way backwards out of the holy residence and continue on a tour of the school, meeting dozens of wide-eyed novices who are as fascinated by us as we are by them.

Equally unforgettable was our experience of tak bat—the daily alms-giving ceremony, which





sees basket-laden monks marching in single-file through the streets at dawn collecting donations of food, their only sustenance for the day. Tak bat is one of the reasons Luang Prabang has boomed as a tourist destination, with hundreds of thousands of travellers descending each year to witness this sunrise ceremony against a backdrop of fading French colonial architecture.

Sadly this fascination has now resulted in hordes of often inappropriately dressed shutterbugs mobbing the monks as they make their silent pilgrimage—smartphones illuminating the darkness as live videos are posted to social media. In Laotian culture it's considered highly disrespectful to follow the monks, let alone snap a selfie with them, and as a result this once sacred procession has turned into a cringeworthy tourist bunfight that most locals now avoid like the plague.

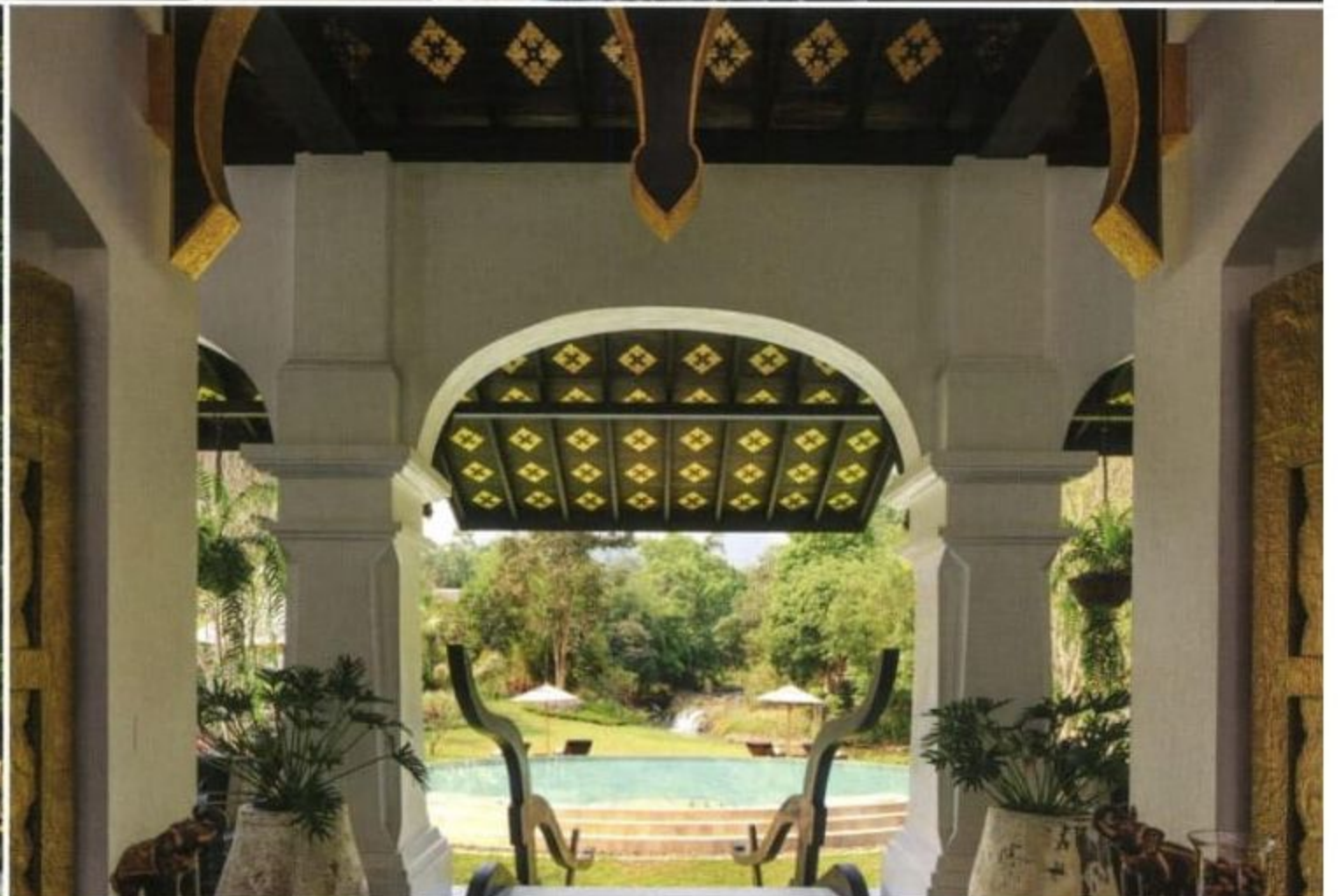
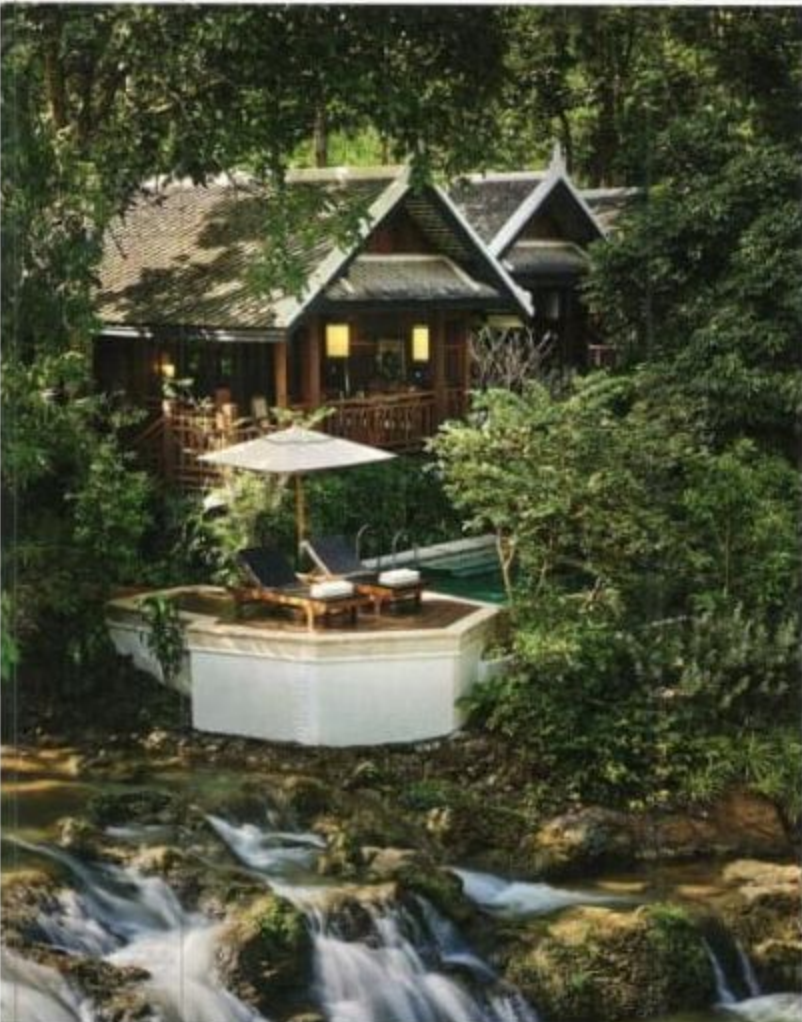
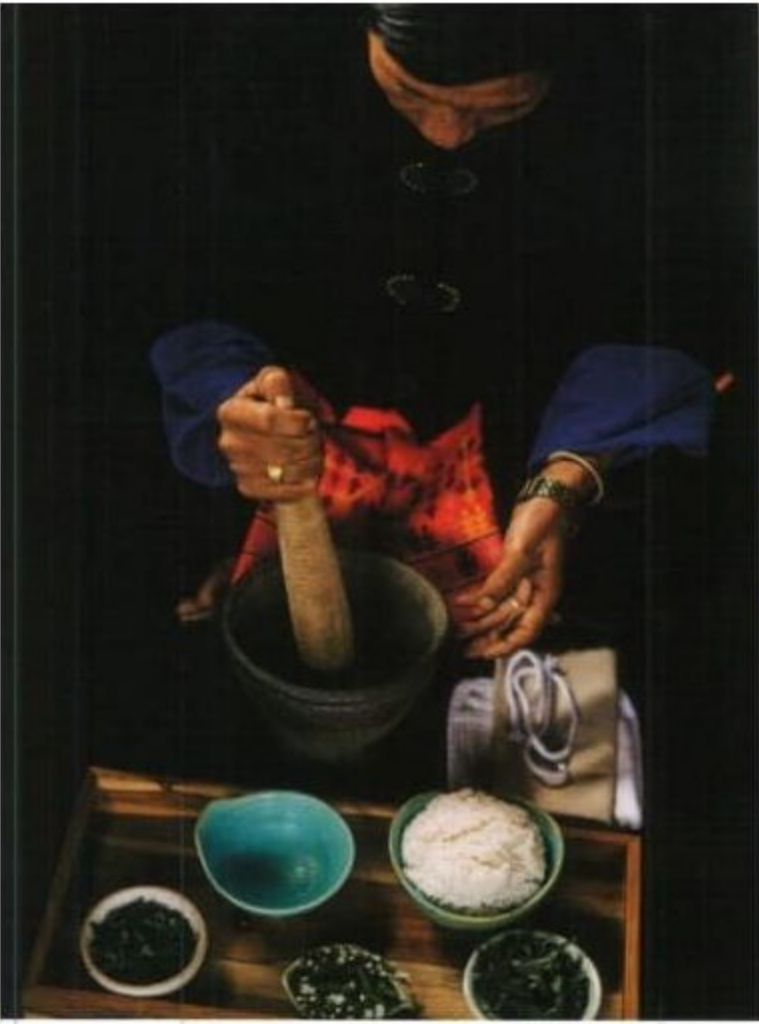
To experience the true spirit of tak bat, Saiyavong drives us out of town to his family village. We're the only tourists and are made to feel welcome as we lay our wicker mats by the roadside and set out our offerings for the monks—freshly made sticky rice, oranges and sachets of strong, sugary coffee mix (which, Saiyavong tells me, help the monks stay awake as they chant through the night).

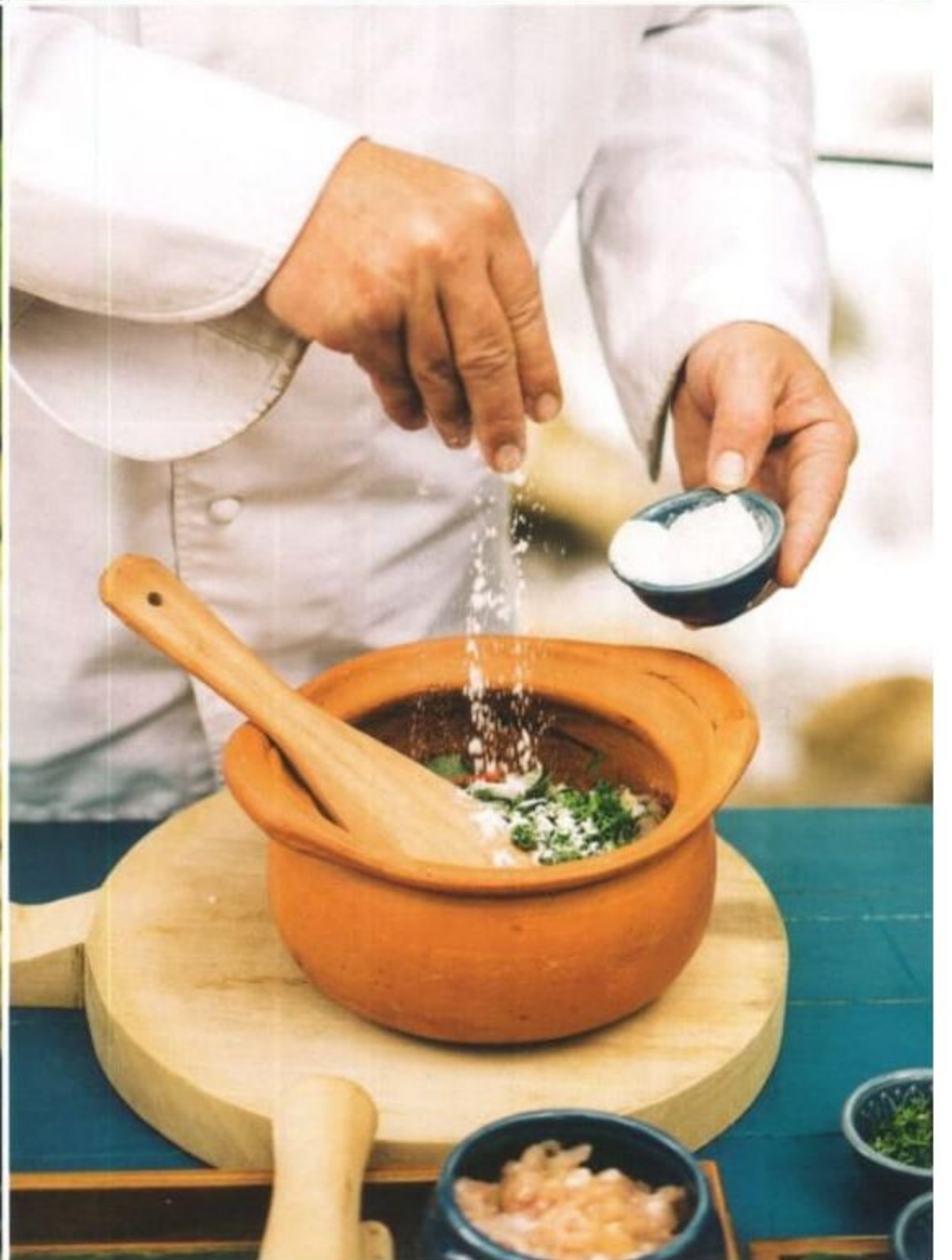
It's pitch black at 5am but the moon spotlights the scene. Laotian love songs blare from a huge speaker and there's a man on a microphone updating the villagers as to the expected arrival time of the 75 monks heading our way from their forest temple. Hot tea is distributed in paper cups and there's a buzz of neighbourly chatter in the air. Laos is a matriarchal society and the crowd is mostly made up of women, many of whom are dressed in beautiful hand-woven fabric wrap skirts, their hair pinned back neatly with ornate ceramic pins. It's eye-wateringly early but it's obvious an effort has been made.

It's an honour to witness this ancient tradition within a remote village community, particularly as the only non-Laotians. The giving of alms only takes around 30 minutes but it's an incredibly moving experience that results in a mood of quiet reflection as we drive back to the hotel. Saiyavong's spiritual responsibilities continue back at Rosewood and he disappears off to tend a wooden spirit house on the front lawn—refreshing daily offerings of flowers and fruit to the protective spirits who guard over the valley. He's also building a hilltop meditation retreat for guests and looks after a statue of the earth goddess, Mae Thorani, that rises from the tumbling torrents of the river. "My colleagues joke that she is my wife because I look after her. I even paint her dress different colours as the seasons change. It's green now but tomorrow I think I will paint it white for spring."

It's the enchanting mix of Buddhist heritage, French colonial design and Laotian cultural motifs that makes Rosewood Luang Prabang such an alluring destination. The man behind this celebratory yet sensitive cultural mash-up is Bangkok-based American architect and landscape designer Bill Bensley. With its faux elephant tusk tables, butterfly net ornaments,

IMAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PAGE: SUNRISE CHANTING AT A LOCAL TEMPLE; HMONG HEALER MR XONG; ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG IS NESTLED IN A JUNGLE VALLEY; A HILLTOP TENT DESIGNED BY BILL BENSLEY; THE GREAT HOUSE OVERLOOKS AN INFINITY POOL; WATERFALL POOL VILLA (LAST THREE IMAGES COURTESY OF ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG)





“Sebastien Rubis has dedicated years to researching near-forgotten recipes and learning the traditional cooking techniques required to revive and preserve them”

cartoonish tiger rugs and oversized silk tassel lamps, his design ethos is bold and eccentric but it works in a perfectly cool, clashing kind of way.

Of the 23 residences, the most remarkable are the six luxury tents perched high in the jungle canopy. Their flamboyant mix-and-match interiors reflect the diverse characteristics of local hill tribes through framed hand-woven fabrics, indigenous art and colourful stencilled walls. Zip-up safari-style canvas walls reveal spectacular views of the distant misty mountains, which can be ogled from the comfort of your cloud-like bed, claw-foot bath or sun loungers out on the teak verandah.

For those not keen to scale the nearly 100 steps to these heavenly hideaways, there are river suites with fishing rods set up on their terraces so guests can catch their supper, and waterside villas with private outdoor swimming pools overlooking the waterfalls. Expect deep slumbers to the soothing sounds of this gently babbling brook.

Vertiginous jungle pathways and elevated wooden walkways zigzag through tropical gardens down to the Elephant Bridge Bar, a cosy cocktail den with antique lamps, board games and hundreds of hand-carved elephant ornaments. As its name suggests, the bar is actually a wooden bridge connecting residences to the central hub of the property.

The main life of the resort is centred around the Great House, an opened-sided white mansion reminiscent of a colonial hill station with high ceilings, dramatic chandeliers, towering candelabras and saffron-yellow leather armchairs cosying up around regal fireplaces. Cool breezes flow through tall archways that lead to an infinity pool surrounded by private chill-out pagodas. It's the kind of place Rudyard Kipling would have whiled away an afternoon—pith helmet in one hand, G&T in the other.

At dusk the resort is illuminated by glowing lanterns, and the smell of wood smoke drifts from a crackling fire pit perfect for toasting marshmallows under the star-spangled sky. By day the manicured lawn sports a croquet set, and bikes are available for the 15-minute pedal into town or more challenging routes up into the hills.

Upstream is the resort's spa, a peaceful sanctuary with glass-floored treatment tents allowing guests to gaze down at the fish while they're being slathered, scrubbed and pummelled. The must-tries of the wellness menu are the traditional Laotian treatments, which are inspired by ancient tribal remedies and feature herbal poultices and balms made from indigenous plants with healing properties.

There's also a healer called Mr Xong from a local

Hmong tribe who, with 24 hours' notice, will come to the spa to heal you. The assessment is simple. Mr Xong just stares at you for a few minutes and ponders the spelling of your name. Then he disappears into the forest to forage for medicinal herbs that will be used in your Hmong herbal massage or cleansing treatment. During my assessment the local medicine man also told me (via a spa therapist turned translator) that I have ghosts in my house, which was unexpected—but apparently they're friendly guardians who protect me, so, panic over. The Laotian treatments involve varying levels of nakedness, so check with staff before you book one. Mr Xong's consultation is part of the 12 Days of Rosewood experience, which is available until December 1.

The dining offering at Rosewood Luang Prabang is a homage to Laotian cuisine lovingly compiled by Sebastien Rubis. The French culinary director has dedicated years to researching near-forgotten recipes and learning the traditional cooking techniques required to revive and preserve them. Dishes reflect the local love of sweet, sour, bitter and salty flavours, including a nutritious soup made with watercress harvested from the resort's river, locally caught fish stewed with aubergine and kaffir, a platter of succulent sausages made from local buffalo and served with sticky rice and tangy chilli jam, and a sour tamarind chicken broth.

Rubis sources his ingredients daily from village markets, the local fishing community and a patchwork of tiny farms that fringe the resort. I joined the adventurous chef and his team for a foraging trip into the valley and within an hour we'd filled our wicker baskets with wild garlic, mushrooms, bamboo flowers and other local roots, herbs and leaves. Guests are welcome to accompany Rubis as he gathers fresh produce and then don an apron for a riverside cooking class, which culminates in a self-prepared feast at the Great House, served the traditional Laotian way—family-style on sharing plates—washed down with a few glasses of French wine.

From its design and dining to its guest experiences and even the staff themselves, Rosewood Luang Prabang celebrates the best of Laotian culture, offering expert insight and authentic encounters that result in a memorable escape that feels luxurious not just because of the sybaritic pleasures on offer but because of the cultural and natural richness that abounds.

Whether it's the Buddhist tranquillity, the freshness of the food, the spectacular beauty of the valley or the majestic waterfalls, there's a magic here that leaves you truly spellbound. ●

IMAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SEBASTIEN RUBIS FORAGING FOR INGREDIENTS; LAOTIAN SPRING ROLLS; A COOKING CLASS; MINCED PORK WITH HERBS AND SPICES SERVED IN FRESHLY FORAGED EDIBLE FLOWER PETALS