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LAOS

Eating high and low in magical Luang Prabang

by JOHANNA READ

FACING PAGE FROM TOP Monks in procession; Luang Prabang sunset. THIS PAGE FROM TOP Fried eggplant with chili sauce dip; Hills near Luang Prabang; In a Yangon park; Market roosters.



→ Laos

WHERE ON EARTH

THERE'S A SPECIAL MAGIC in Luang Prabang, Laos. It is from the mist that slips off the mountains, skims over the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, and swirls into this former royal capital. It is from the monks in bright orange who receive alms every morning from devout locals seeking merit. It is from the sun that sparkles off the golden stupas of the 32 temples in this tiny city. It is from the charming townspeople who greet you with a smiling *sabai dee* every time they see you. And it is from the magnificent food.





...Feast your eyes on freshly picked morning glory flowers, chilies and ginger...

Laos is blessed with unique ingredients unavailable anywhere else in the world and the chefs of Luang Prabang know what to do with them, combining them in unusual and unexpected ways. There are four different indigenous eggplants. The local watercress has a distinctive pepperiness. *Sakham*, a forest vine, has a unique spiciness. Buffalo skin is dried in the Lao sun. River weed is harvested from the rivers on three sides of town. Sausage lovers delight in the variety. Different from neighbouring Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia, food from Laos is less sweet, more astringent and has a forest-y herbaceousness. Texture is extremely important.

Whether your dish costs 50 cents or 15 dollars (yes, this is considered high end in Laos!), whether you eat it sitting on the curb by a *wat* garden or by candlelight looking out over the Mekong, you'll find your meal magical.

Wander through the day market to feast your eyes on freshly picked morning glory flowers, chilies and ginger; sample homemade cakes and sweets; buy some spices for your own kitchen; see the rooster that will become tonight's dinner; and discover the ingenious method Lao chefs use to carry crabs home and into their cooking pots.

Dani Heinrich, one half of *GlobetrotterGirls.com*, recommends the *Tum Tum Cheng* cooking school as a good way to learn about Lao food. Her class started with a tour and explanation of the photogenic ingredients in the market and ended with a feast of the five different dishes they made.

To learn even more, take a guided tour of the *Living Land* farm. See how organic vegetables began before they ended up on your Luang Prabang plate; participate in any of



SERVES 2

Luang Prabang Lemongrass Chicken Sandwich

THIS SANDWICH CAN BE made regardless of whether you are in a hurry and just want to do something different with a supermarket roast chicken, or have planned ahead and have time to marinate the chicken overnight.

MARINATED CHICKEN

Lemongrass 4 stalks

Garlic 6 cloves, peeled

Water ¼ cup

Lime juice of 2

Olive or Vegetable Oil
2 Tbs

Fish Sauce 3 Tbs

Sugar 2 Tbs

Chicken Breast or Thighs
2 skinless

Kaffir Lime Leaves 6,
cut in thick strips

- 1 **SKIP** this step if you are using supermarket roast chicken.
- 2 **PEEL** off the hard outer layers of the lemongrass and cut into 2 cm pieces. In a blender, purée the lemongrass pieces and garlic with the water, lime juice, olive oil, fish sauce and sugar. Put this mixture into a ziplock plastic bag with the chicken and lime leaves. Refrigerate overnight.
- 3 **REMOVE** the lime leaves and then roast or sauté the chicken until cooked through.

SANDWICH ASSEMBLY

Baguette 1

Laughing Cow Cheese
4 triangles

Sweet Chilli Sauce¹

Tomato 1, sliced

Cucumber 1, peeled, sliced
lengthwise

Chicken Thigh or Breast,
sliced thickly

Salt and Pepper to taste

Lettuce

Fresh Herbs²

¹ *Mae Ploy is the best, but Maggi is just fine.*

² *Such as Thai basil, coriander.*

- 1 **CUT** the baguette into sandwich sized pieces (depending on how hungry you are, approximately 15 cm in length). For each sandwich, cut through the centre of each piece to *almost* split the baguette in half (this gives your ingredients one less side to spill out of onto your lap).
- 2 **SPREAD** a triangle of Laughing Cow cheese onto each side of your sandwich. Add a few dollops of sweet chilli sauce. Then layer in slices of the tomato, cucumber and chicken. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Then stuff lettuce and herbs into any remaining empty areas. Squeeze to help keep everything in there.

the 13 different stages of traditional rice production and meet Susan the water buffalo. This is a great way to promote sustainability and support local families.

The best way to be enchanted by a culture is to sample its food. My favourite low-end Luang Prabang lunch is from the baguette ladies near the post office on Sisavangvong Road. Lunch for two will set you back about five dollars. Want to try a taste of Laos at home? See right for how to make a lemongrass chicken sandwich.

For a more refined meal in Luang Prabang try L'Elephant, where a Lao dinner for two will cost you about ten times what your sandwich lunch cost. But at 50 dollars it will still be a great deal. One of the best restaurants in town, L'Elephant is a good place to sample *kai phen* (dried river weed) and *jaew bong* (a paste made from chilies and buffalo skin). Dishes featuring local mushrooms, lemongrass and river fish are also excellent. As you dine under the gentle ceiling fans you'll feel transported into the past.

Tamarind: A Taste of Laos should also be on your restaurant list. Here you can eat traditionally, rolling balls of sticky rice with your fingers and dipping them into flavour-bursting home-style dishes. The juice blends use local ingredients like hibiscus flowers and jujube fruits. Blue Lagoon is the place to go for»



FACING PAGE FROM TOP Vegetables in the market; Morning in Luang Prabang. LEFT Luang Prabang Night Market buffet.

fantastic fusion food in a gorgeous garden. Try Tannak Lao restaurant and you'll immediately sign up for their cooking school to learn how to replicate this deliciousness back home.

The restaurant at the 3 Nagas hotel still benefits from its glowing *New York Times* review. While it is no longer what it once was, you'll still enjoy the restaurant's bamboo soup with bitter leaves, salads, and anything flavoured with tamarind or betel leaf.

Dining riverside can be high-end — for Luang Prabang, but still cheap by western standards. Saffron Café will satisfy at any meal of the day, and has excellent coffee. View Khem Khong is frequented by both locals and tourists, and is a good choice for traditional dishes.

A great place for low-priced drinks and a few snacks is Lao Lao Garden — the garden is beautiful and the service is friendly, with a wide range of happy clientele. Try the do-it-yourself Lao barbecue. If the cocktails don't attract, Beer Lao is considered by many to be the best beer in Asia.

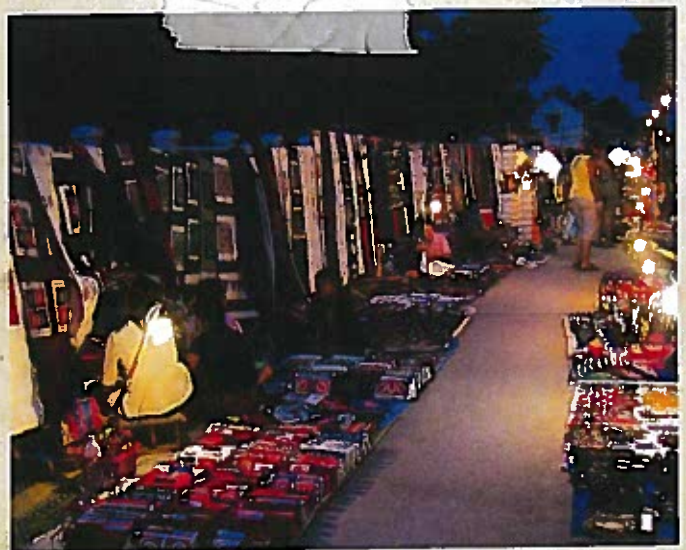
For a low-end dinner, choose carefully in the food stall alley at the night market. Avoid the backpacker buffet tables (where you can fill your plate for a dollar), as some of the food may have been sitting out longer than you'd like. But this is a great place to find other inexpensive choices like banana leaf packets stuffed with herbs and grilled fish or lemongrass chicken skewers, fresh off the grill. You can't just eat while on holiday. You do need a place to stay and something to do between snacks. Like its eating options, Luang Prabang has a full range of selections.

"The BelleRive is one of our favourite hotels in Luang Prabang", says Miral Mousa of TrailFinders Canada, experts on Southeast Asia travel. In the historical centre and with views of the Mekong from every room, the BelleRive is a boutique hotel, but far from the most expensive in town. TrailFinders' clients and others in the know can often be found staying here.

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Night market scenes; Wat Xieng Thong. **FACING PAGE FROM TOP** Luang Prabang Morning Market crabs; Sunset; Lao noodle dish.

A travel agent like TrailFinders is indispensable in a region like Southeast Asia. Not only will they make your arrangements but they provide excellent advice on what not to miss according to your interests, and they know what is worth a splurge and what isn't. Things change rapidly in this part of the world and TrailFinders keeps you up to date.

They'll also share insider information on sights like Luang Prabang's sacred alms-giving ritual, *tak bat*. There are hundreds of monks in Luang Prabang and each morning you can see a saffron-robed procession walking slowly through the streets. Local people, on their knees, place small bundles of homemade sticky rice into the monks' alms bowls. If you find a quiet spot off the main street, keep your head lower than the monks' and don't interfere, you can get beautiful photographs. If you would like to participate in the



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ritual, ensure you get advice on the best way to do so respectfully; this is a religious tradition, not a tourist attraction.

The main evening activity in Luang Prabang is the night market. Sisavangvong Road closes to vehicular traffic as the sun starts to set and small stalls appear with an eye-popping range of goods. The street is enchanting, with lights and bright smiles and, unlike in most other Asian markets, there is no pushiness and the bargaining is gentle.

Buy a hand-woven silk scarf as a table runner, cushion covers, or a tote bag. Most of the textiles sold here are made by the sellers or someone from their family. The Hmong designs are stunning — bold two-colour swirls, triangles and Keith Haring-esque figures — and, especially for the smaller items, well-priced. And when you give her the first sale of the evening, the seller will quickly touch the rest of her goods with your money, transferring the luck you have just brought her to her future sales **T&T**



Visit

IN LUANG PRABANG it's more difficult to use an address than to just wander around. Everything mentioned here, except the Living

Land farm, can be easily reached with walking directions from your historic district hotel.

Tum Tum Cheng Cooking School and Restaurant

On Facebook, or email info@tumtumcheng.net

Tamnak Lao Restaurant and Cooking School

Day and evening classes; visit their book exchange which collects monies for orphanages and ethnic-minority schools.

www.tamnaklao.net

Living Land Farm

5 km outside Luang Prabang. Book through your hotel.

www.LivingLandLao.com

The BelleRive Boutique Hotel

On the shore of the Mekong near Wat San Suk.

www.theBelleRive.com

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Issue 9 SPRING 2013

CAD/US \$6.95



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