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Discover the Fascinating History of Luang Prabang

by Fiona Harper

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Travel writer Fiona Harper flies to Laos to discover the secrets of the little-known gem, Luang Prabang.

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Laos is one of those countries that pretty much slips under tourist radars in favour of its more well-known neighbours.

The totally landlocked nation is surrounded by Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and China, and its tourist trail is less trodden than most of these nations.

However, if you are heading to Laos, you cannot miss Luang Prabang!

What to expect in Luang Prabang

One of Luang Prabang's main attractions is its remarkably well-preserved townscape which hints at a tumultuous past. UNESCO bestowed Luang Prabang with World Heritage status in 1995 noting, "an outstanding example of the fusion of traditional architecture and Laos urban structures with those built by the European colonial authorities in the 19th and 20th centuries."

It's the historic amalgamation of culture, customs, religion and architecture that led UNESCO to bestow Luang Prabang with World Heritage protection. The small city is a significant historic site, a living breathing museum with universal heritage value.

Barefoot Buddhist monks continue the centuries old alms tradition where they collect food and offerings from the faithful each day at dawn. Wats (or temples) in various levels of grandiosity are on every corner. Long boats spread along the Mekong River at a leisurely pace. Streetscapes are dominated by French colonial architecture, none more so than the main street that dissects Vat Nong Village, known as the Old Quarter.

Three centuries-old homes with rosewood floors and lime-washed earthen walls retain French provincial character which are now converted into the delightful Nagas Hotel. Creaky floors are not quite level, walls follow whimsical contours of craftsmen's hands while timber shutters repel midday heat. Recent restoration work revealed three ancient bottles of orange essence extract, salvaged from the days when one of the building, Lamache House, was the official ice-cream supplier to the Royal Court. A shady courtyard restaurant specialises in the best of French/Laos cuisine influenced by former royal chefs.

A brief history...

Luang Prabang got its start some time around 700AD under its original name of Muang Sa.

By the 14th century, capitalising on its strategic location on the Silk Road, it was known as Xieng Thong and was the capital of the powerful Kingdom of a Million Elephants. Over the next few hundred years it became the site of constant conflict, with everybody, from royals to tribesmen, fighting for control of the city. During this tumultuous period it became known as Luang Prabang.

Laos in wartime and the 'secret war'

The French stamped their authority in Laos before the turn of the 20th century and peace reigned for a time before WWII. However, the Americans had a major impact countrywide by secretly bombing Laos' famed Ho Chi Minh trail for nine years. Known as the 'secret war', more than 40 years on, one third of Laos remains contaminated with un-detonated land mines, or 'bombies', which have killed or maimed 20,000 people since the war ended.

The proliferation of these explosives remains the reason rural Laos is such a challenge to travel overland. It also prevents this lush fertile country from reaching its full potential.



Raise funds for the people of Luang Prabang

In an effort to develop a burgeoning tourism industry, as well as generate much needed funds, the Lao Friends Hospital organises the Luang Prabang Half Marathon each October. The hospital continues to treat children injured by land mines, and is the first full-service paediatric hospital in northern Laos.

By entering the running festival, fitness-focused travellers can experience running through World Heritage streets while making a valuable contribution to the health and wellbeing of future generations.

Still suffering the impact as a victim of the 'secret war' Luang Prabang is one of those rare places that encourages travellers to reflect upon their own impact. It's a town that wears both its heart and its history unashamedly on its sleeve.

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