

LAOS

is ready for
its close-up by SUZANNE WRIGHT

Long in the shadow of neighbors Thailand and Vietnam, this low-key Southeast Asian country awaits discovery.



It's November in Laos and it's unseasonably sunny, wet and warm. Uniformed schoolgirls, their glossy black ponytails reaching to mid-back, grasp bicycle handlebars with one hand and an umbrella with the other. A pair of giggling saffron-clad teenage monks passes by wooden bungalows, each one boasting a giant satellite dish. A thirty-something businessman talks animatedly on his mobile phone, his starched sleeve revealing a tattered white string wrapped around his wrist to ward off evil spirits. Restaurants both modest and pricy boast water buffalo jerky and crème brûlée. Young and old women alike favor the traditional skirt, a sinh, sometimes with a bejeweled designer t-shirt.

Traditional and modern Laos exist—however improbably—in harmony.

Landlocked, The People's Democratic Republic of Laos occupies the Northwest portion of the Indochina peninsula; it's slightly larger than Utah and has a population of about 6.2 million. For a small country, it's ethnically diverse, with more than 100 groups. It bears the imprint of those who have sought to dominate it: the French during the colonial era, the Japanese during World War II, the United States during the Vietnam War and, most recently, the communists. Still, for all the turmoil its soil has seen, the people are relaxed and the pace is gentle. In spite of the rapidly developing infrastructure—many hotels, roads, airports are being built or improved—this is the region's forgotten country.

Luang Prabang has an appealingly dilapidated majesty. Surrounded by mountains, the former royal capitol has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, thanks to its surfeit of wats (temples) and colonial shophouses. The unprompted greeting "saibadee," is repeated from daybreak to sunset by children and adults alike. Soon, the singsong word rolls off my tongue.

One morning, I rise before dawn and join reverent locals and interested visitors for the traditional morning alms. A line of monks clad in bright orange robes, brown arms extending rice bowls for offerings of rice on the town's main street

as the sun rises. It's a moving spectacle, quiet and powerful, setting the course for a day of temple sightseeing in the compact, leafy town. There are more than 30 temples here. The most memorable are Wat Xieng Thong, with its sweeping roof and brightly colored mosaic tree of life; Wat Mai, with its gilded relief panels;

IT'S A MOVING SPECTACLE, quiet and powerful, setting the course for a day of temple sightseeing in the compact, leafy town.

Wat Visoun, with its collection of "calling the rain" buddhas; and Wat Winsunalat, which features a distinctive "watermelon" stupa.

Another day, I take a half-day trip to the Pak Ou Caves. I board a wooden boat on the Mekong River, which is the color of Ovaltine, for the slow ride, gliding by green terraced banks where farmers plant Chinese cabbage, corn, peanuts and potatoes. The captain approaches the cliffsides, where a clutch of boats are already nosed into the narrow landing. He expertly inches past each one, until I can step, zig-zag fashion, on a few boats, then onto the land. First, incense fills my nose, followed by the sound of rattling Joss sticks ringing in my ears. Discovered in the 16th century by King Setthathirat and once inhabited by monks, the lower cave contains 4,000 stone, gold and wooden Buddha images. One hundred steps lead up to the upper cave,

who does *your* hair?

meet the dream team



Salon under the direction of owner and founder, Daniel Lewis, celebrity stylist featured on

Bravo **shear**genius

Haircut and styling starting at \$35

 green peridot

The Shops at Starwood
6959 Lebanon Road at
Dallas North Tollway in Frisco
(469) 362-7980
www.greenperidot.com



COMPANIES DO BUSINESS.
CHILDREN GET THE REWARDS.
EVERYONE WINS.

MAY 18-24

TPC FOUR SEASONS RESORT • IRVING, TEXAS

From the beginning, our Championship has focused on raising funds for Dallas-area children. So be a sponsor, join us for the tournament, and you'll have the time of your life. Best of all, you'll give children hope for a lifetime.

Call 972.717.1200 or visit hpbnc.org to purchase sponsorship packages and tickets.



HP BYRON NELSON
CHAMPIONSHIP • 2009



A Great Time. A Greater Cause.

where there are fewer Buddhas and fewer people. A small, barefoot girl holds a tiny white bird in a rattan cage. For \$2 you can buy it and release it. On the way back, I stop at Whiskey Village, where preparations for a wedding ceremony are taking place: a half dozen young women sitting in plastic chairs peel garlic, while

“AT WAT SIMUANG, for a small donation, I was blessed by a monk who tied an orange string around my wrist and sprinkled holy water on my head.”

a circle of four older women squat on the ground, weaving marigolds and banana leaf decorations.

Laos has distinctive cuisine—sticky rice is a staple and fish sauce and galangal are important ingredients—and Luang Prabang has a thriving restaurant scene. At Tamarind Restaurant, I sip iced lime and lemongrass and tuck into a \$5 sampler plate of local dishes. At the beautifully restored 3 Nagas Restaurant, I enjoy a set dinner of crunchy and salty sun-dried Mekong weed served with spicy jam and buffalo skin; a garlic-laced salad with fried shallots and garlic and vegetables; aromatic bamboo soup with amer leaves; sautéed beef with onions; and coconut milk and tapioca with seasonal fruits. The Maison Souvannaphoum Hotel serves dinner poolside amidst its lovely grounds as a soft rain falls: minced chicken salad with mint and lime juice, marinated deep-fried Mekong fish with garlic and pepper; and an array of fresh fruits.

The capital of the country, Vientiane, gets less press than Luang Prabang, but has its own quiet charm. I never wanted to check out of the Settha Palace, with its handsome French colonial architecture, refined service and stunning tropical gardens. The gold-spired Luang Stupa is the country's most important and holiest Buddhist site (often pictured on travel brochures), but the Wat Sisaket Museum with its 7,000 weathered terracotta Buddha images resonated most strongly with me. At Wat Simuang, for a small donation, I was blessed by a monk who tied an orange string around my wrist and

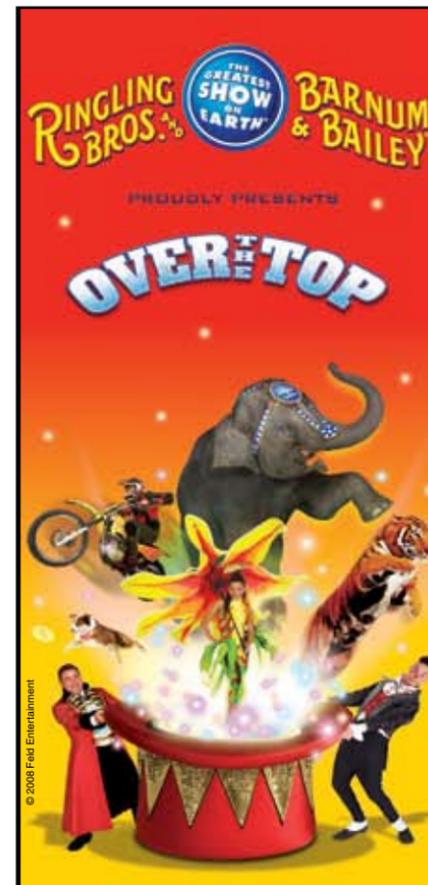
sprinkled holy water on my head.

Word is that the Plain of Jars is seeking UNESCO status to entice greater numbers of tourists. Odd and overlooked, it was one of my favorite attractions: giant stone jars—some reaching 10 feet in height—are scattered over 625 miles of U.S. bombed grasslands. The three sites on the plateau remain one of archeology's unsolved mysteries: are the limestone jars funeral jars or did they hold lao lao, rice whiskey? The stone is not native to the region; it is believed that the urns were rolled here by elephants.

It's markedly cooler at this higher elevation and the low-hanging cottony clouds punctuate the cornflower blue sky. The countryside is cratered but gorgeous and there's not another soul in sight; mooing cows and wind rustling tree leaves are the only sounds. Though site 1 is the largest and closest to town, sites 2 and 3 are more picturesque. I walk between the latter two sites, past a cemetery, through a rice paddy and over a bamboo bridge beneath a sun that beams, but doesn't punish. The violence of the Vietnam era may still scar the land, but empty bomb casings have a second, more hopeful life as planters spilling with flowers in a Hmong village.

Southern Lao's big draw is Wat Phou ("Temple on the Mountain"), the splendid 12th century Khmer site that predates Cambodia's Angkor Wat by 200 years. This "lost city" sits in a tangle of romantically overgrown foliage, most of its buildings unrestored and in ruin. It requires effort—specifically a car, a car ferry, another car and foot power—to get here, so Wat Phou is far less visited than Angkor Wat. Admiring the Hindu carvings, I climb slowly up the steep steps, sitting for a long while, surveying the spectacular view. I have to use my imagination to conjure the former kingdom, but there are murmurs of its grandeur in the silence.

Myths & Mountains arranged my customized, eight-day itinerary, providing a guide and driver in each city, booking flights and reserving hotels. Visit www.mythsandmountains.com to learn more. ▣



JULY 29 - AUG. 9


AUG. 12 - 16


For full show schedules and ticket information, visit www.Ringling.com, [ticketmaster](http://ticketmaster.com)® Retail Locations, Arena Box Offices or call **1-800-745-3000** Toll Free

For group sales information call **1-866-248-8740 ext. 103**

Come one hour early to meet our animals and performers at the **All Access Pre-show - FREE** to all ticket holders!

 Stay Connected At Ringling.com



THE URBAN BLOSSOM
 FLOWERS | ART | BOUTIQUE

Daily Floral Design & Delivery | Corporate Floral Design (Lobby/Offices)
 Event & Wedding Floral Design | Art Gallery & Art Leasing
 Boutique (Jewelry, Bath & Body, Vases)



The Urban Blossom | Retail Location 5035 Addison Circle East | Addison, TX 75001
 972.763.0808 www.theurbanblossom.com
 Photography by VIM Studio | www.vimstudio.com

The Urban Lounge
 Wedding & Event Consultation Lounge
 by appointment only
 3100 Carlisle, Suite 223 | Dallas, Texas
 75204 | 972.392.4139

THE URBAN Lounge
 a floral experience.



we'll take it from here




Allison Johnson
 FAMILY LAW SOLUTIONS

- Divorce
- Custody/visitation
- Property solutions

Divorce can be complicated and often involves financial, legal and emotional snags. Allison | Johnson is here to protect you with family law solutions and a superior level of personal service. They offer years of experience and can resolve matters with choices from collaboration to complex litigation. Their personal, highly skilled approach is both effective and efficient. And totally focused on you.

Plano 972 608 4300 • Dallas 214 389 2895 • aj-familylaw.com