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AHLAN!
Travel

Looking for Laos

Ahlan! jettied to Luang Prabang, where we found one of the most magical destinations on the entire planet (fact)

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AHLAN! Travel

Here at *Ahlan!*, we're no strangers to Southeast Asia. We've made countless trips to Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam – arguably the region's most famous destinations. But when we were invited to experience lesser-known Laos, admittedly we had to Google its location.

Nestled between Thailand and Vietnam, you will find the lovely country of Laos. Here, the pace of life is much slower than that of its Asian neighbours. While tourism in Laos is well established, it's not yet on the mass-tourism map. Laos has kept its traditional way of life and blended in growing tourism. The people are hugely diverse and the scenery ranges from jungle to rice fields to mountains and river islands.

Our destination was Luang Prabang, a quaint town with UNESCO World Heritage status. Sitting on the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, it is an idyllic spot that's fast becoming the country's new tourism hot spot. In other words, a hidden gem that you won't find on all your friends' Instagram feeds (yet). And considering it's a mere two-hour flight from Bangkok, it's an exciting and convenient addition to your travels within the region.



SHOP TILL YOU DROP

The charming Luang Prabang night market is a must-do experience. Open daily from 5pm to about 10pm, it's an amazing sight and offers the most extensive collection of handicrafts in the country. With around 250 vendors selling their hand-made products nightly, the market showcases an extensive variety of handicrafts made by local ethnic groups. On display are many types of textiles, exquisite ceramics, antiques, paintings, coffee and tea, quilts, shoes, silver, bags, ornaments and even cutlery made from recycled bombs. In fact, the items sold here are unique – you won't find them anywhere else in the town... or the country, for that matter.

INFO: Open daily 5pm-10pm, located along Sisavangvong Road from the tourism office in the direction of the Royal Palace Museum



MILK A BUFFALO (YES, REALLY)

You might have milked a cow in your lifetime, but have you ever milked a buffalo? That's exactly what we did when we visited Laos' only buffalo farm, Laos Buffalo Dairy. While buffalos have been big business in the region for hundreds of years, the locals are only starting to wake up to the animals' dairy possibilities. The farm is a socially responsible enterprise consisting of a commercial dairy and production facility that makes products such as yogurt, cheese and ice cream for local and

overseas customers. The owners cooperate with people from villages in and around Luang Prabang by renting their buffalo, which provides the families with a regular income stream from an underutilised resource, namely female buffalo. For only US\$6.25 (Dhs23), you'll be able to cuddle up to the beautiful 450kg buffalos, or feed Ferdinand the friendly buffalo, who weighs in at a whopping 750kg. You'll also get to wash them and give them a scrub. It's like a day spa for buffalo, and will also stand out on your Instagram feed!

INFO: More info on tours at laosbuffalodairy.com



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TAKE A DIP IN THE KUANG SI FALLS

Luang Prabang has both natural and historical sites, but none are as instantly recognisable as the breathtaking Kuang Si Waterfall. In fact, when we heard we were heading to Laos, it was immediately at the top

of our must-see bucket list. In the dry season, the water at Kuang Si takes on a bluish hue, owing to the presence of minerals like copper. In the wet season, the water is a deep green and you can hear the sound of the falls well before you can see them. After seeing the mind-blowing pictures on

Google Images, we can confirm the falls are just as incredible in person. To make the most of it, pack a picnic, bring your swimsuit, and make a day of it. Swimming in these world-famous waters was the highlight of our trip. It's THAT amazing.
INFO: Tickets LAK20,000 (Dhs9) per person, open daily 8am-17.30pm

MAKE THE MOST OF THE MEKONG RIVER

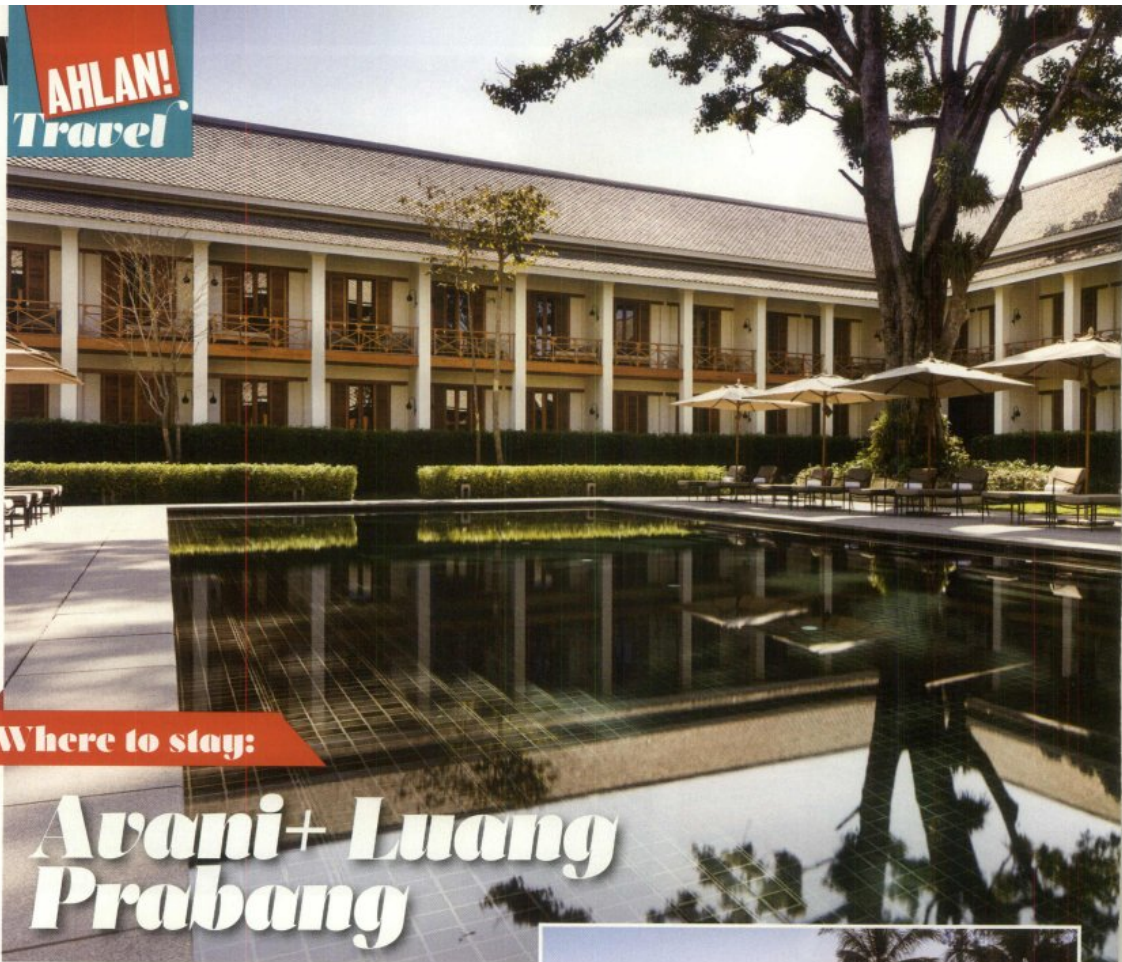
With luscious green hills contrasting its muddy brown waters, the majestic Mekong River is also a must-see. There are several waterfront restaurants that offer a variety of local dishes, as well as some western menu items. If you really want the full experience, be sure to book one of Mekong Kingdom's selection of river cruises. From half-day adventures to overnight stays and even dinner cruises, there is something to suit every itinerary and budget. We enjoyed a magical sunset dinner cruise that – as the name suggests – combined a sumptuous meal with a mesmerising sunset over Southeast Asia's most magnificent river.

INFO: To book, visit mekongkingdoms.com

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Where to stay:

Avani+ Luang Prabang

With tourism in Luang Prabang on the rise, there are a variety of hotels to suit every budget. But when it comes to luxury, service and location, it simply doesn't get better than the charming Avani+ Luang Prabang.

The hotel is a modern boutique hideaway with a storied history. Formerly the site of French officer quarters, then home to a landmark local hotel, these peak-position grounds in the heart of the old town now welcome you with classic-contemporary style – design that's a breath of fresh air while remaining true to the town's colonial architectural heritage – providing an experience that stands out in Luang Prabang.

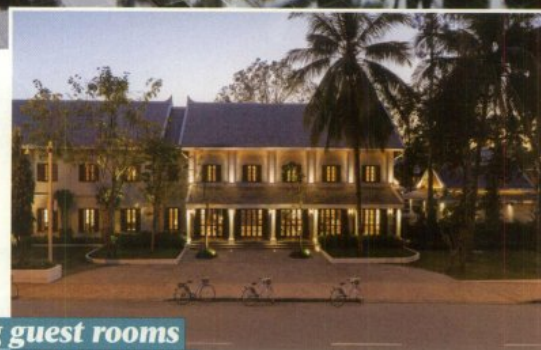
The hotel features 53 intimate rooms and suites, and is located just steps from the Mekong River,

Royal Palace and Luang Prabang Night Market. In fact, the market and most of the town's major attractions are just a short walk away. Believe us, it's ridiculously convenient if you want to pop across the road to the shop, or take a spur-of-the-moment stroll through the markets.

The hotel's stunning guest

The stunning guest rooms offer open-plan living with balconies that overlook either the pool or a private courtyard

rooms offer an open-plan experience, with French-style louvered wooden doors that open out to a balcony overlooking either the pool or a private courtyard, and interior



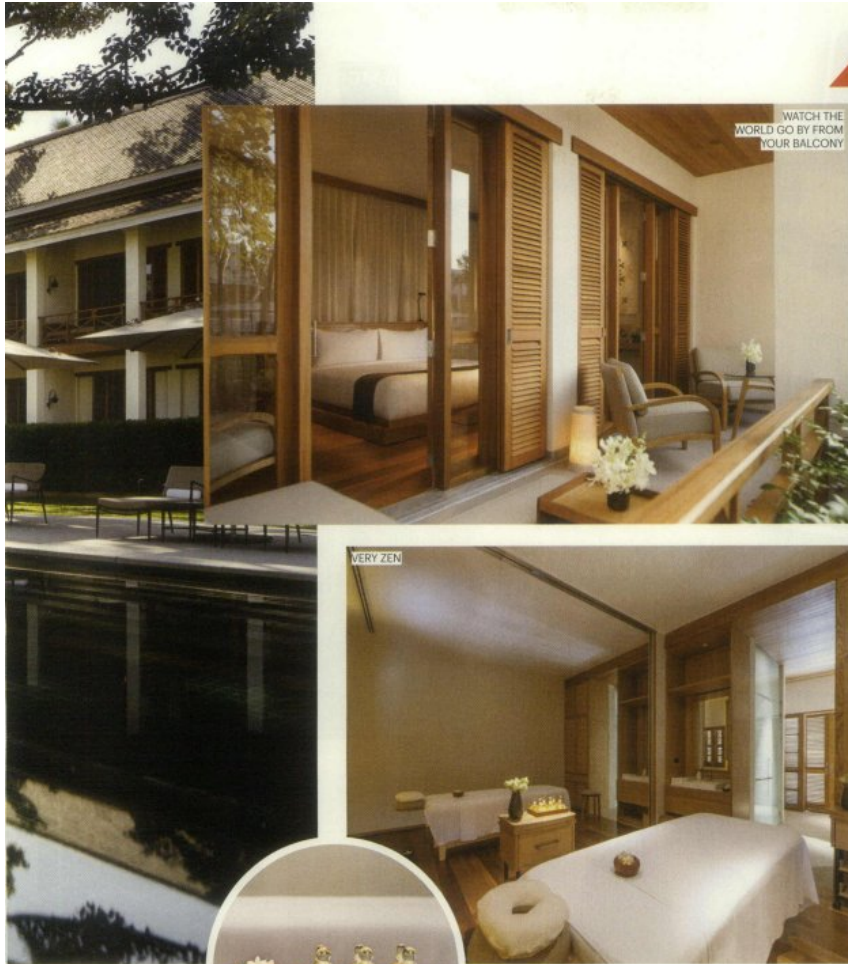
design that is inspired by the colonial French heritage. We were lucky enough to stay in a pool-view deluxe room and spent most of our time lounging on our balcony overlooking the

picturesque property.

As we have come to expect from Southeast Asia, the food in Laos is spectacular. And the hotel's Bistro – which serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, indoors or outdoors – doesn't disappoint. The menu favours classic bistro-style fare and Lao

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Where to stay en route:



AVANI RIVERSIDE BANGKOK HOTEL

If you're travelling to Laos' Luang Prabang from the Middle East, you'll have to fly via Bangkok. So why not make the most of the stopover by staying for a night or two? Fortunately, Avani's Riverside Bangkok hotel is the perfect place to crash before or after your visit to Laos.

From the top of the 26-storey hotel – its rooftop bar and pool – right down to the lobby, the hotel is the perfect place to relax and unwind, and offers a base from which to explore nearby neighbourhoods and tourist sites. Each of the hotel's 248 stylish guest rooms and suites boast uninterrupted city and river views. It's practically an Instagram hotspot from the moment you draw the curtains.

Fortunately, the hotel's super-convenient riverside location makes many of Bangkok's attractions easily accessible. Shuttle-boat services link to the Asiatique night market and entertainment complex, and the BTS Skytrain at Saphan Taksin boat pier allow swift connections to Bangkok's commercial, shopping and entertainment districts.

INFO: Rooms from Dhs421 per night. Avani Riverside Bangkok, +66 2 431 9100, minorhotels.com/en/avani/riverside-bangkok

dishes, and the upstairs bar – with its street-side veranda – offers the ideal perch from which to observe the daily rhythms of local life in Luang Prabang.

No luxury hotel stay is complete without a bit of pampering. The AvaniSpa offers two single and two double treatment rooms with a communal relaxation area. The spa adopts a straightforward yet individual approach to wellness. Problematic body zones are assessed and treatments recommended, chosen from one of four results-driven options: boost, balance, calm or purify. We opted for 'calm', which was the perfect treatment on a rainy afternoon after a long, lazy

lunch. For those who like to keep in shape during their travels (don't look at us), AvaniFit

focuses on lifestyle elements that promote a healthy body and healthy mind, and the hotel's gym offers a range of cardiovascular and strength equipment. Daily yoga classes are also offered, and there is a 25m swimming pool, with a pool bar serving smoothies, fresh juices and sharing platters.

If you haven't had time to plan your trip properly, you can let the hotel take care of your itinerary. Avani+ Luang Prabang offers a variety of excursions, including a selection of Mekong River cruises, and a guided hike up Mount Phousi.

Other activities include trips to waterfalls (seriously, don't visit Luang Prabang without seeing the amazing Kuang Si Waterfall), biking, cooking classes and visits to the town's many different ancient ruins.

Truth be told, as much as we loved our visit to Laos, it was our stay at Avani+ Luang Prabang that really completed the experience. The attention to detail (and comfort!) is beyond impressive. In fact, the hotel is the first 'Avani+' property from the Avani Hotels & Resorts brand, which promises to showcase next-level style, design and facilities. And that, it certainly does. Can we go back now, please?

INFO: Rooms from Dhs582 per night. Avani+ Luang Prabang, +856 71 262 333, minorhotels.com/en/avani/luang-prabang