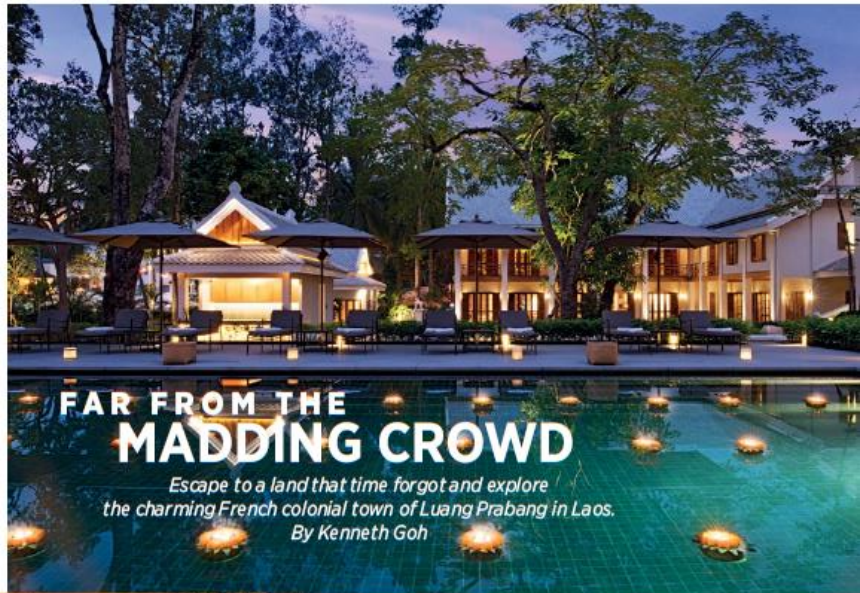


It's five o'clock in the morning and I am up in the ancient royal capital of Laos to give alms to the monks. Surrounded by mountains, Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage-listed town that's resplendent with Buddhist temples, crumbling French colonial architecture and the remnants of royal Laotian culture dating back to the 14th century. As the sun begins to rise from the jungle, barefoot monks step onto the streets with brass alms bowls in shoulder slings to collect their meal for the day. This tradition began centuries ago, and has outlasted every political upheaval in Laos' history, surviving colonisation, civil war and the current communist regime.

The monks are a ubiquitous sight. You can spot them in their saffron robes walking past the white iron gates of the king's former palace or riding pillion on scooters past the hotel I am staying in, the Avani+, which sits just on the crossroads of the main drag to the city. It's a charming hotel that was converted from a bungalow built for the French military brass in 1914. Today, it's a cosy haven whose roofline, wraparound balconies, and façade quietly merge into the surrounding streetscape of colonial architecture.

It's Pi Mai (the Laotian New Year), which is much like the famous Songkran festival in neighbouring Thailand. The streets are completely drenched, much of it from makeshift inflatable pools and hoses that sprout from every available water tap along the road. Every night, stalls magically appear along the roadside with Hmong women setting up rows of stalls to sell handicrafts such as mulberry paper, silk wraps, silver bracelets and slippers embroidered with elephants.



FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

Escape to a land that time forgot and explore the charming French colonial town of Luang Prabang in Laos.

By Kenneth Goh



The wares are similar to those you see in Thai night markets, but the pace here is slower, less frenetic, and everyone seems happy to just wait out the hours chatting while watching Korean dramas on their mobile phones.

I spend much of my time ticking off the bucket list of sights in Luang Prabang: Exploring Wat Xieng Thong, That Pathum, Ock Pop Tok and Caruso Lao; visiting the famous Kuang Si waterfalls with its breathtaking blue waters; and even popping into the Laos Buffalo Dairy, a sustainable initiative for local farmers that produces homemade cheese and dairy products. And, as it's the New Year, we make a visit to the main temple, Wat Mai, to see the yearly ritual of the washing of Buddha. It is a magnificent sight at night, with everyone lit by the flickering lights of the temple's numerous golden lamps.

Food-wise, Laotian cuisine is a curious mix of Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese cuisine. Spices reign supreme and the lush lands afford an abundance of herbs and fresh vegetables. My best meal was had in the hotel, prepared by the new Executive Chef, Patricia Yeo, who prides herself on serving guests locally sourced food with global sensibilities. The food was simply presented, deliciously healthy and had enough local nuances to give a kick to the senses.

The charm of Luang Prabang is firmly centred on its strong Buddhist soul, French colonial architecture and rich cultural past. Despite the rapid encroachment of tourism on this magical land in the mountains, I reckon a visit in the near future will still give you a peek into a country that has blended the best of the past and present; a charming bygone age with modern convenience. ■

From top: The pool at Avani+. The indoor lounge. Young Buddhist monks. Traditional almsgiving ceremony along the streets of Laos