



## THE SECRET LIFE OF MONKS

They drink fruit shakes, speak English and eat more than rice in the spiritual heart of Laos

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Shady guys: (above) monks carry golden umbrellas to keep the sun off their heads. Daily ritual: (right) locals wait outside their homes with offerings for the monks.



Good night: locals sell their crafts at the night market.

# Monkey business

There's more to being a monk than gathering morning offerings. Ewen Bell visits Luang Prabang

IN THE early morning light hundreds of monks dressed in orange robes walk silently through the streets of Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of Laos.

The ritual of giving alms is repeated daily before the first rays of sunlight clear the horizon.

Locals wait patiently outside their homes with offerings, placing rice and other food carefully into the monks' bowls as they walk past in single file.

The line of monks winds through the streets before each group splits off to return to their own temples.

Joining the morning alms is a beautiful experience, but you'll get a chance to meet monks any time of day just by wandering around town.

The monks enjoy a stroll down the main street to get a fruit shake.

When the sun is shining the boys carry golden umbrellas to keep the sun off their heads, making them even easier to see.

Luang Prabang is a spiritual centre for the people of Laos.

Every few hundred metres there is a temple. And not just any old run-down temple, either.

Each glistens with gold ornaments, tall prayer balls and elegant representations of Buddha. Yet each has its own character and charm.

Wat Xieng Thong is my favourite, near the geographical tip of town where the Kham River meets the Mekong River.

Colourful mosaics bring a sense of joy to the spiritual setting and fragrant trees grow tall along the fence.

Before communist rule in Laos, this was the site for the coronation of kings. The ruler-in-waiting would arrive at Luang Prabang by river and spend three days in contemplation within the temple before taking command of his kingdom.

Today the daily routine for novice monks is to contemplate the lessons of Buddha.

Boys come to Luang Prabang from all over Laos to spend years studying,



Fine dining: (above) fish for sale. Boys town: (left) boys come to Luang Prabang from all over Laos to study the teachings of Buddha.



Fresh produce: the morning market at Luang Prabang.



Relics: the former Royal Palace is now a national museum.

yet only a few will continue after the age of 18 to train to become a monk. Most novices will return to life in their home towns and carry the teachings of Buddhism for the rest of their lives.

Most monks in Laos speak good English. I ask novice Tui about joining the ritual of giving alms.

"It's OK for tourists to take part, but we don't just eat rice. We're very happy when people give us vegetables from the market," he says.

Tui is referring to the daily morning market, which takes place before breakfast. It's a great place to buy fresh produce, but for cheap souvenirs it's best to return at dusk for the night

market, when H'mong villagers sell their crafts and clothing.

Shopping in Luang Prabang is a delight because no one hassles you as you walk by. You can browse first and bargain later.

EXQUISITE silks are arranged temptingly against the French colonial architecture.

Upmarket textile stores and boutique beauty spas are cheek by jowl with elegant hotels and charming cafes.

Everything in Luang Prabang is presented with style and on a pleasingly small scale.

The biggest building is the Royal Palace, which now houses a museum full of all things Laotian.

Cultural relics and a magnificent adjoining temple are both beautiful, but the palm-fringed lily pond is the real treat for visitors.

By mid-morning the flowers have opened to form a colourful display. Huge bees buzz among the lilies and monks rest on the edge of the pond in silent prayer.

Further out of town, the more adventurous visitors can ride elephants, go on cycling tours, trek to minority villages, and take river cruises that go to the Buddhist caves at Pak Ou.

There's even a popular waterfall within an hour's drive that is a refuge centre for bears and tigers.

The problem is that once you arrive in Luang Prabang it's difficult to convince yourself to leave town at all.

The pace is so gentle, the dining so enticing and the monks so serene that you can quickly find that low gear and just relax.

About the only thing it lacks is a beach to lie on.

The airport is little more than a tin shed and when a plane lands the pilots get out and help unload the luggage—a good sign the tourist trail hasn't ruined the simple charms of this ancient city.

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Serene scene: beside the Mekong River.

THE DEAL

Getting there: Bangkok Airways flies daily from Bangkok to Luang Prabang for less than \$150 each way. Book online at [www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com). Thai Airways connects Melbourne and Bangkok twice a day with direct flights starting from \$1535.

Staying: Lotus Villa is in the heart of the old town with rooms from \$65 a night. For some colonial style, try the Villa Sante Hotel at \$120 a night, opposite the Inspired Cuisine of Three Elephants restaurant. Book through [www.asiarooms.com/laos/](http://www.asiarooms.com/laos/).

Touring: Imperial Expeditions runs Laos excursions, which include five-star accommodation and trips to the Buddhist caves, waterfalls and ethnic minority villages. The five-day excursion is priced from \$1600 including international flights. Book at [www.imperialexpeditions.com](http://www.imperialexpeditions.com) or ph: 8005 0499.