

## Laos - between traditions and a custom-friendly development

Think about ancient towns, A passion for traditions and old customs. All of this refers to Laos. This country still maintains the ancient traditions and charm. The development which has occurred in the neighboring countries in recent years does not seem to have influenced this state. It's Citizens are very proud of their customs and wish to keep them, refusing any kind of messy development. The simplicity of the life style, which distinguishes the Asian population from other worldwide cultures is very marked here.

One may say that the people living here are nearly afraid of the fast development occurring elsewhere, since It would risk to compromise their customs and traditions. Their look seems to be a little shy. Once landed in Luang Prabang, the most important city in Laos, one is fully immersed in the mystic atmosphere of this country. The heart of the city is formed by a cluster of temples each of them presenting different architectures and decorations. Even though they seem to be similar, all of them deserve to be visited. Observing their beautiful decorations as well as their architectures pertaining to different ages, you may immerse yourself into the local atmosphere and get an idea of Laos and in particular Luang Prabang. Laos is not a country which has many monuments differing one from another. One will not spend the time attentively visiting different monuments like in other countries. But an uncommon and original atmosphere attracts foreigners, taking them into a different world. One has to appreciate the mystic and simple life, the relaxing and unique surrounding environment. The landscape around contributes to shroud the city in this mystic world. The waters of the Mekong river slowly flow nearby the city. From the city, one may sometimes hear the pleasant noise of the typical Laotian boat smoothly navigating, which rings out as a soft song or as a "*leitmotif*" of the simple and relaxing daily life spent in the country. By navigating on the Mekong river, one may reach old villages situated on the other bank or on some small islands, as well as hidden holy caves, such as Pak Ou, a cave full of little statues of the Buddha standing in different positions.

In the middle of the town, at the top of the Phou Si hill stands the Stupa of Wat Chom Si. From this temple It is possible to see the landscape around, the various temples situated in the city and the fairy tale landscape around the old city, as well as watch a beautiful sunset. Every evening, from 05:00 to 10:00 PM, at the slopes of this hill, along the main street, there is a market where local people lay out and sell traditional Laotian products. Everything in this market accurately reflects the Laotian way of life.

The people still live in their typical wooden houses following their traditions and getting dressed in their ancient outfit.

It is worth to spend some nights in one of these houses and experience the local life. One is kindly accommodated by citizens who are happy to tell about the life in Laos and explain the origins and traditions of their country. A brown haired girl, with a silky skin, welcomes me. The joy and simplicity of her face sum up the fairy, mystic and simple world of Lunag Prabang.

In spite of the fact that in the city there are different restaurants offering Western meals, there are still some places, run by local people which serve traditional foods, cooked following the ancient recipes. It is advisable to eat in some of these traditional places to better get to know the culinary history and customs of the place.

Every morning at 05:30/06:00 AM, depending on the season, monks walk around the old town, carrying their alms bowls. Devout persons stand outside the temples or their houses and offer foods to monks. This ceremony, called Sai Bat or Morning Alms, is one of the most original and ancient holy traditions in Laos. Even though in some part there are many tourists who take a huge quantity of photos while the monks are walking, this ceremony still maintains its own charm and originality.

As far as I could see, I do not think that tourists bother the ceremony. Some of them decide to keep an appropriate distance, while watching the ceremony, Others join the local people offering foods to monks as well. Furthermore, you only have to go to some hidden part of the old city to have a chance of observing the ceremony without anyone around, except for some devout persons who make donations.

One may understand how this ceremony is not common in most parts of the world. Accordingly, It attracts the attention of many foreigners wishing to be fully immersed in the mystic world of Laos.

As long as foreign people respect the traditions and customs of the countries which they are visiting, they are always more than welcome to participate in local ceremonies. The Population will be delighted to see how their customs and way of life are appreciated by people with different traditions.