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The New York Times 2007 Article Entitled
"The centuries-old allure of Laos's Relaxed Capital"

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The Centuries-Old Allure of Laos's Relaxed Capital



Tanja Geis for The New York Times

Motorcycles park under cover outside a sprawling market in Vientiane. [More Photos »](#)

By DANIEL ALTMAN

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THE unmarked path twists off a dirt road and into the forest, and within a few seconds there is the surreal sight of pale white bodies swathed in colorful sarongs, milling around a wooden house on stilts. Up the stairs, a woman named Noi greets guests, sends them to a ramshackle changing room and then into a windowless cell where three benches are barely visible through the dense steam infused with eucalyptus, citrus, rosemary, lemongrass, basil and mint. She offers weak tea to sweat-drenched survivors, who are encouraged to take a fresh sarong and lie down on one of six beds for a slow but powerful massage in the open air.

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This isn't a latter-day commune or the headquarters of a cult in the business of brainwashing backpackers. It's an herbal sauna on the grounds of the Wat Sok Pa Luang, a temple on the outskirts of Vientiane, in [Laos](#). Lying there as the sun sets with only the trees, birds and an occasional mosquito around, you might just think about putting down your own roots.

It's easy to turn into a turbo-tourist in Southeast Asia. [Bangkok](#), [Chiang Mai](#), [Phnom Penh](#), [Siem Reap](#), [Luang Prabang](#), [Ho Chi Minh City](#), [Hanoi](#) — a vacation can start to feel like a mail route as you dutifully hit every beach and temple. When it's time to take a break, there's Vientiane.

Laos's relaxed capital is rich with pleasures, and its tranquillity can be a tonic for those who have been hopscotching nonstop around the region. New hotels are adding to the city's appeal. Fancier bars and restaurants are opening up, too, mainly to serve the capital's several thousand foreign aid and government workers. Yet the fundamental allure of the city is centuries old: its location along a long stretch of the Mekong River, its pungent traditional foods and the low-key Buddhist culture that has sprinkled gracious temples and monuments throughout the city.

Most hotels are along the Mekong or within a stone's throw of the city center, and the rest of the city is eminently walkable. The Japanese government recently donated a road that will lead from the airport, through the city and then all the way to the Friendship Bridge that crosses the Mekong to [Thailand](#).

"It's really good for tourism because the road is better and the transport is better," said Det Temmerath, who was helping out in his mother-in-law's shop while waiting to start a government job. He said he was especially grateful for the generosity of the Japanese, who have also given three-quarters of a billion yen (about \$6.2 million at the current rate of 121.19 yen to the dollar) in cultural grants since 1975 and are duly thanked on signs outside several local sights.



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A young monk eager to practice his English. [More Photos »](#)

"It's a gift, not a loan," Mr. Det said. "When we get some loan from the Asian Development Bank, the country is still in debt." That's a thought to keep in mind as you pass the bank's spotless local office, surrounded by manicured lawns, on Lan Xang Avenue.

The new hot spots are often run by expatriate Europeans or Australians. Most retain some local flavor, though, whether it's the wicker-backed armchairs lining the bar at [Jazzy Brick](#) or the dark wood furniture that fills the suites at the [Green Park Boutique Hotel](#).

Some colonial gems have also reached an international standard, like [Kua Lao](#), a restaurant in an old mansion named by many residents as one of the capital's best places to eat local cuisine. Laotian food is a delicious, spicy crossroads of Thai, Vietnamese and southern Chinese cuisine with the addition of its own special flavors, from local chili paste to — for the more courageous — ant larvae.

In addition, a few citizens of the old colonial power, [France](#), have returned bringing more up-to-date influences, as at [Le Central](#), a modern bistro near the center of town. South Asian merchants, too, have begun to populate the markets selling gemstones and jewelry.

Despite these burgeoning charms and cosmopolitan touches, however, it may take some time for tourists to regard Vientiane as more than an enjoyable afterthought.

After savoring a meal at Kua Lao with his grown children, Bob Bell, from [Virginia](#), said the trip to Vientiane had been a last-minute decision. He and his family had been visiting Kuchinarai, in northern Thailand, where Mr. Bell was stationed as a naval officer in 1964. Then his son, Rob, asked when they would ever be 30 miles from the Laotian border again. "We were going to [Vietnam](#) and these guys, who are passport-stamp-hogs, wanted to get another country," the elder Mr. Bell joked.

AND just as Laos is often overshadowed by Vietnam, Thailand and [Cambodia](#), Vientiane is usually left in the shade by scenic Luang Prabang. But there are marvels throughout the city.

[Wat Si Saket](#), Vientiane's oldest large temple surviving in its original, early 19th-century form, has a peaceful courtyard overlooked by tall palm trees and filled with memorial pillars, stone stupas (traditional Buddhist monuments) and butterflies. The surrounding cloister, with its terra-cotta-tiled roof, contains countless niches displaying thousands of tiny Buddhas, plus bigger ones painted gold.



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Along the edge of the cloister are potted plants bursting with flowers. Everywhere is the sound of bats roosting in the eaves of the sanctuary, whose interior walls are painted with fading but minutely detailed murals that tell pictorial tales of battle and devotion. If you're lucky, you might catch what passes for spectacle here: French tourists chasing after an orange-swathed, umbrella-carrying monk like so many paparazzi.

The markets are worth a special visit. For lunch, the [Talat Sao market](#) offers fried fish, minced meats mixed with herbs and served with sticky rice, barbecued sausages and spicy noodle soup. There's fresh sugar cane juice or, if you prefer, a bottle of strong spirits with a cobra, scorpion or both soaking inside. The market's clean, orderly interior offers embroidered silk in every form, from tablecloths to ties, plus shining silver jewelry and dozens of counterfeit coins claiming to be silver piastres from the era of French control.

Finally, of course, there is the [Pha That Luang](#), the shining golden temple that is Laos's national symbol. It doesn't matter how many photographs you've seen of the Pha That Luang before you come. The first glimpse, even from a mile away, will take your breath away. You could be forgiven for thinking that the stupa, not the sun, is lighting up the sky.

As at other big temples in the capital, you're bound to find one more symbol of development and globalization: cheerful young monks hoping to practice their English. Still, the growth of Vientiane is all a matter of perspective. When asked if there had been big changes in the city, Phone (pronounced pohn), a 22-year-old monk tending the Wat That Luang Neua temple next to the Pha That Luang, said yes, indeed there had. The city had expanded quite a bit since taking over as capital from Luang Prabang, he said. Of course, that happened over 400 years ago.

VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Regional airlines including Lao Airlines, Vietnam Airlines and Thai Airways serve [Vientiane's](#) Wattay International Airport with daily or near-daily flights. A one-way flight to Vientiane from [Bangkok](#), a regional hub, costs \$84 for overseas travelers on Lao Airlines, according to the airline's Web site. Visitors must pay \$35 cash and supply a passport-size photo to receive a visa upon arrival. The departure tax is \$10.

In the city, tuk-tuk rides range from 10,000 to 30,000 kip, \$1 to \$3 at 10,000 kip to the dollar.

Dollars are generally preferred by almost everyone, with the occasional exception of tuk-tuk drivers.



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The country code for [Laos](#) is 856, and the city code for Vientiane is 21.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Green Park Boutique Hotel** (248 Khouvieng Road; 263-063; www.greenparkvientiane.com) offers an idyllic, leafy escape inside a walled compound near the center of town. Airy suites at \$120 a night have modern, minimalist décor, polished wood floors and balconies with views of the pool. Wireless Internet is free, and airport transfers are \$5.

A bit out of the way, but worth the walk, is the **Hotel Beau Rivage Mekong** (Fa Ngum Road; 243-350; www.hbrm.com), positioned near some of the nicer beer gardens along the river. Guests take off their shoes before entering an atrium with staircases snaking up to the pastel-colored, artsy-beachy rooms. A superior room with furnishings worthy of a design hotel and a Mekong view is \$55, with free wireless Internet.

If you must drench yourself in decadent, colonial-era ambience, there is the **Settha Palace** (6 Pang Kham Street; 217-581; www.setthapalace.com), with tiled floors, soft lighting, a French restaurant and Art Deco bathrooms. Deluxe rooms are a pricey \$180, with airport transfers at \$9 in a leather-upholstered London cab, and wireless Internet — which doesn't work in all rooms — at \$16 for five hours.

WHERE TO EAT

Kua Lao (141 Samsenthai Road; 215-777; www.kualao.laopdr.com) serves intensely flavorful Lao food in an old house hung with woven silks. A meal for two runs about \$20, or about 20,000 kip. A traditional Lao show is included at dinner.

Vilaylac Thepvongsa welcomes guests for homestyle Lao meals at **Ban Vilaylac** (Watchan Village, north of Wat Chanthabuli; 222-049). Daily specials, especially with fish from the Mekong, are not to be missed. Dinner for two is about \$10.

Le Central (77-78 Setthathirat Road; 243-703) is a newish bistro with French management and, predictably, a boisterous French clientele. Three-course dinners for two, with French wines, cost roughly \$60.

WHERE TO DRINK

Jazzy Brick (House No. 038 Xieng Nguen Village, on Setthathirat Street; 771-1138; www.jazzybrick.com) is a dim Western-style cocktail lounge with Southeast Asian touches. Big tables upstairs are filled with foreign aid workers. There are more than 150 cocktails on the menu, and it's no joke — the bartenders can actually make them. Drinks are \$2 and up.