

A Palace for Pra Bang

Luang Prabang's National Museum houses the city's namesake icon

By Helen Khoo

In a historical city like Luang Prabang in Laos, itself a veritable museum, the Luang Prabang National Museum still has charms to draw me back.

The museum building was once a royal palace, the home of King Sisavang Vong (1885-1959), whose statue still watches over the compound. He ordered the steeple on the French-built, Beaux-Arts-style structure to be demolished in favour of the traditional Laotian pinnacle still seen in the present façade. The angular, symmetrical building is surrounded by generous grounds, located between the Mekong River and Mount Pousi (the highest point in old Luang Prabang). When the Pathet Lao came into power in 1975, the last crown prince was exiled from the place and a year later, the royal palace was opened to the public as the Luang Prabang National Museum, its private royal quarters still intact.

The museum houses a collection of 20,000 objects including textiles, musical instruments, royal accessories, decorative arts, ceramics, documents, Buddhist art and royal furniture from different periods. Having seen a Dong Son drum in the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), I was thrilled to count about a dozen similar bronze drums casually lining the verandas, seemingly inviting visitors to sit on them (heaven forbid).

The star piece of the museum is a palladium – a sacred object believed to have the power to preserve the city possessing it. In fact, the city is named for the piece, the Pra Bang, a standing Buddha statue (83 cm in height) covered in gold leaf. It is installed on a high throne in an ornate pavilion

near the road. If all the other artefacts were non-existent, the presence of the Pra Bang alone would justify the museum's premium status, particularly in terms of Theravada Buddhism in Laos. Each year on the festival of Pimai (held on the third day of the Lao New Year), the Pra Bang is shown to the people in the courtyard of the neighbouring temple of Wat Mai. Folks file past devoutly to purify the statue with water. It is then that locals outnumber tourists in this city, a popular UNESCO heritage site.

Visitors may enter the six public rooms, where the king and queen held audience, as well as the five private rooms in which they lived. The public rooms are themed halls with mosaics and murals of Laotian legends and ancient scenes executed by Laotian and French artists. The halls are showy while the private rooms are quite modest. I loved the surprising library, with sets of Chinese histories from the archives of the Ming and Qing dynasties. On the Victrola was a 78 rpm record of Claude Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, with the needle poised to play - all frozen in time!

If you like boats and cars, the royal boatyard and garage are in the grounds for you to visit. The Royal Ballet Troupe of Luang Prabang has its headquarters in a separate building on the property. Three evenings a week the troupe performs excerpts from the Laotian version of the epic Ramayana for the public.

During my two hours inside the museum, I found my husband Warren a captive audience. As the uniformed women guards looked on in amusement, I was able to show him the gestures and postures of Buddha statues, as well as some of the signs of a Great Man. At last, he was getting a taste of what I do when I'm away from home – and at the ACM guiding. Luckily for me, he thoroughly approved!

Helen Khoo joined the ACM when it opened in 2003 and served as a Volunteer Greeter. She received her ACM docent badge on the auspicious day of 1 April 2008 and gives the ACM full credit for spurring her interest in things Asian, balancing her earlier interest in things European and American.



The Luang Prabang National Museum, the French-built former royal palace with its traditional Laotian pinnacle; photo by Strange Skies



Luang Prabang National Museum
Souphanouvong Road,
Luang Prabang, Laos

Tel: +856 71 212 122
Email: nangpheng@hotmail.com

Open daily: 8:00 – 11:00 am
1:30 – 4:00 pm

Guided tours are available in English

Protective Nagas guard the Royal Chapel at the Luang Prabang National Museum, where the Pra Bang statue is enthroned; photo by Jason Ea