

Laos: love at first site (inspection)!

Laos is probably not quite the destination that immediately pops up in your mind as a meeting or incentive planner. Why? Maybe you doubt there is any MICE potential to be found? I had the unique chance to travel to this tranquil, mysterious and mountainous country and came back with a firm statement. Laos is a truly authentic location/experience that gets straight into your heart!

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Together with the passionate, rather young and therefore enthusiastic, very helpful guys of Laos Mood (www.laosmood.com), their dedicated brand MICE People (www.mice-people.com), a French DMC based in this part of Asia, and a small selection of Belgian incentive houses and pros working in the travel market, I spent seven days in Laos on a Familiarization trip. First we made a quick visit to Thailand, to the part with the tempting name 'Golden Triangle'. An adventure, because the final destination would be difficult to reach? No way, not any more. As from 15 December, Thai Airways International starts flying non-stop between Bangkok (BKK) and Luang Prabang (LPQ) on a daily basis! Brussels-Bangkok is scheduled 4 times a week.

How divine, we flew business class with Thai Airways International (www.thaiairways.be) in the, in my modest opinion, properly named Royal Silk Class. We were totally spoiled from the departure in Brussels to the landing in Bangkok: freshly printed glossy's to read, bubbles and superb wines to drink, an awesome choice of Asian food and even a gift, a fresh orchid flower while leaving the plane from the purser.



As I could manoeuvre my comfy chair to an even more comfy sort of bed I arrived completely relaxed after a very long nap. The same happened, by the way, while returning to Europe. A tip to share and also a great service to business class travellers: do visit their Royal Orchid Spa Lounge: relax and enjoy a 30 minute traditional neck & shoulder or a meridian foot massage at Bangkok Airport, free of charge before boarding Bangkok-Brussels.

The reason to join this trip, an invitation from both Laos Mood and the airliner, was to find out about their new scheduled flights, flying from Belgium to



Thailand and Laos and have a sniff at this rather unknown part of Asia. My excuse was I've never been there, and I was very curious.

Arriving at Chaing Rai airport, we immediately hopped on a minivan to take us to our first hotel in the Golden Triangle area. The organizers had a well kept secret surprise moment in their itinerary. Hop off the bus for an acrobatic climb into a pirogue. Cruising up the fast flowing river, scarily fast with 50 shades of muddy brown colour, in a boat where the engine decided to take a break after five minutes. Luckily for us, we could climb into another boat to reach the Chiang Sean Pier of the Anantara Golden Triangle (<http://goldentriangle.anantara.com/>). Before we climbed on their welcoming committee, a cute bunch of friendly elephants, cold refreshing towels were presented to wipe off the sweat, in my case a combination of slight fear and the effect of the enormous humidity. The offered neck massage at the hotel lounge proved to be an absolute bliss. We had sundowners and snacks together with the Anantara's charming GM Christian Zunk, enjoying a breath-taking view on the jungle and the Mekong river, plus a view on three countries: among them Myanmar. We enjoyed a magnificent Italian dinner and interesting chats with biologist Sophie from Australia, who passionately runs the local Elephant

Foundation. We visited her camp with her 30 Dumbo's, as well as the Opium House (showcasing the history of the rise and fall of this drug).

Thailand was a luxurious and relaxed stopover, but we were headed for Laos. You'll be surprised by the number of incentive ideas as we experienced. But take my advice; go with a rather small group instead of big one, to do justice to your client. Just mentioning the amount of hotel rooms one finds. And then especially visit that gorgeous town Luang Prabang.

We reached this gem by first crossing the border by boat and quickly getting our Laos visa while enjoying our first Beerlao, before embarking doing a 2 day boat cruise

(<http://www.luangsay.com/Luang-Say-Lodge.Laos-mekong-river.html>) on the river Mekong, which frankly started to become boring after some time. Okay, nice green hills, speedboat taxis disturbing the silence, stops at ethnic tribe villages where the Khamu and Hmong live, and an impressive cave filled to its rock ceiling with 1,000 antique Buddha statues, but activities on board were rather... sober and minimal: mostly lounging, eating, reading, sleeping and, improvised but great fun, a beer contest. BE against NL, we tasted eight different brands while blindfolded, among them Leffe. Or was it Duvel? Guess who won?

We hopped off for a one night stay at Luang Say Lodge (it comes along with this Luang Say Cruise) for an interesting musical and dance intermezzo by local youngsters. We needed that break! The lodge is everything you think of a jungle style lodge: a mosquito net, a fan, some electricity blackouts, creepy noises during the night, a view on the water, wooden bungalows. Next door was the



Hotel Pakbeng Lodge, with a much larger capacity of Superior and Deluxe rooms than LS Lodge, but a lesser 'jungle and expedition' feeling. The hotel is under French ownership (www.pakbenglodge.com).



Finally: we reach the magnificent formal royal city of Luang Prabang. Since its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1995 (with a treasure of 33 temples and 111 historic Lao-French buildings) the town has slowly become a major player in leisure (read mostly backpackers) but also for corporate travel.

Luang Prabang, settled at the convergence of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers, is linked to the



world through its international airport. The town is surrounded by lush forests, mountain ranges and boats. It's home to a lot of fine hotels, some of them nestled in the very picturesque 'protected' part of town. No traffic lights, no honking cars, the soul is refreshed here simply by the devoted atmosphere. A very Buddhist atmosphere, as Luang Prabang can be proud to have the oldest temple in Laos: Wat Xieng Thong, built in 1560 by King Sethathirath. An absolute highlight of this trip was to attend Tak Bat, the alms giving ceremony. At sunrise you see hundreds of monks, old and young, dressed in their saffron robes, with their begging bowl on the still sleepy streets. On my knees on the pavement, with a comfortable cushion under them I must admit, donating rice grains in total silence without even making eye contact in an insanely fast pace, was simply a WOW moment. The line-up is one of tourist but also locals and inhabitants.

We had the joy of staying one night at two completely different hotels, in both size and ambiance. The first one had the atmosphere of old colonial times, Luang Say Residence, with pavilions of rooms and, in this decade important to travellers, very good Wi-Fi connection.

(www.luangsayresidence.com). The second venue stole my heart, partly because of its female GM with the best sense of humour ever, Australian Kirsty Danks-Brown. We did the site inspection of Hotel de la Paix (www.hoteldelapaixlp.com) while walking her dog, a sweet Labrador. This former prison was transformed into a superb boutique hotel, with enormous high ceilings: very recommendable. Their Spa, under supervision of the utterly charming miss Pookie, was a true divine experience.

As the centre of this town is so well protected there are strict rules for hotels concerning swimming pools, building regulations and more. Understandable, the bigger venues are therefore located outside of the town center, but always close enough for bikes or tuktuks. Lots of hotels offer this service. Xieng Thong Palace, right at the back of Xieng Thong temple in the heart of town, with Spanish GM Guillermo, is another feel good to stay hotel. It's small, only 26 rooms and the former



royal bedroom is now a Spa
(www.xiengthongpalace.com).

You find so much history and stories in this town, also in the hotels. Take Satri House, in ancient times the residence of a real Prince of Laos named Soupha-nouvong. The current female owner, who started with only seven rooms, nowadays offers 14 Deluxe Rooms, 7 Deluxe Plus Rooms, 7 Junior suites and 3 suites. She made the historical building into a very characteristic and charming place with the young French GM Henri in charge. It's full of antiques, paintings, objects and fine furniture (www.satrihouse.com). Next door is the former house of the mistress of the prince (how handy!): also a hotel. Villa Maly, with its covered open air restaurant on deck (www.villa-maly.com).

In the outskirts you find interesting hotels for MICE groups, also concerning the number of rooms, with real meeting room facilities: the Kiridara (www.snhcollection.com/kiridara/) and The Grand Luang Prabang, with its stunning big gardens and Mekong views (www.grandluangprabang.com).

Anno 2014, it is so clear. The entire peninsula is scattered with a nice choice of fine restaurants and an international cuisine, bars (we even spotted and visited a Belgian bar serving a load of Belgian beer brands) and hotels. The nightlife is somewhat less

busy and swinging. All these ingredients make Luang Prabang one of the most appealing Asian destinations. But what, besides visiting temples, can you DO here with groups: take for example teambuilding. We enjoyed activities like cycling through the centre, having a tuktuk race, cooking classes to explore Lao cuisine (at Hotel de la Paix they offer them, but also at a professional cooking school called Tamarind, max 25 persons (www.tamarindlaos.com)), we enjoyed a hilarious QR code quiz, we canoed on the river, visited a stunning waterfall where elephant treks are possible as well, and had our adrenaline levels raised during a zip slide, inches away from the noisy and loud waterfall at Tad Sae. To learn more about ethnic, traditional weaving, we visited an atelier as well.

But time to say goodbye to Luang Prabang, move on and fly to Vientiane, the capital, for a short visit. In front of Green Park (www.greenparkvientiane.com), where we spent the night and all 33 rooms are situated around the pool, were Vespa scooters waiting for us. We jumped on the backseat and went for a ride to explore this dynamic city and its crazy traffic, before having dinner at Settha Palace, where they hosted a Norwegian Church regional meeting. One of the group members took a peep at the menu card and found a classic oeufs-meurette. Thanks to a quick order from Jean-Francois the GM, within minutes the plate was in front of him, to his big surprise. Tailor-made hospitality (www.setthapalace.com). A quick site inspection of Lao Plaza, a large corporate-like hotel, was also on the program (www.laoplazahotel.com): very good meeting facilities, lots of security and bodyguards. The US embassy was in the house!

Tasteful cherries on the cake during this short city trip were the lunch at the floating restaurant on the river and a coffee break at Ansara: a 14-room boutique hotel, the former residence of the Thai Embassy in Vientiane. They are doubling their capacity by adding another 14 rooms in the building next door by the end of the year and digging a swimming pool. The portraits of our passports were accurately redrawn by an employee here: a moment we will not easily forget. Nice gesture. Is it the interior, the tasty

modern design, or small details like free toothpaste for guests? I don't know, but someone tells me there's a woman running the place (www.ansarahotel.com).

Convinced about the zillion opportunities that this destination can offer the MICE market? BBT Online is! Luang Prabang has enough potential to keep a travelling party nicely busy for days. MICE People, with its creative interpretation and detailed ideas, tailor-made and sometimes improvised on the

spot, is the perfect partner to make the most of your time in Laos.

Credits:

A Big thanks to Thai Airways International, Laos Mood and MICE-People for this familiarization trip. Who else took off with BBT Online? Nancy Schoenmakers of behalf of BCD, Eric Schorreels of UG INCENTIVES, Eric Moris of BUSINESS PASS and Eric Valenne of Travel Magazine.

