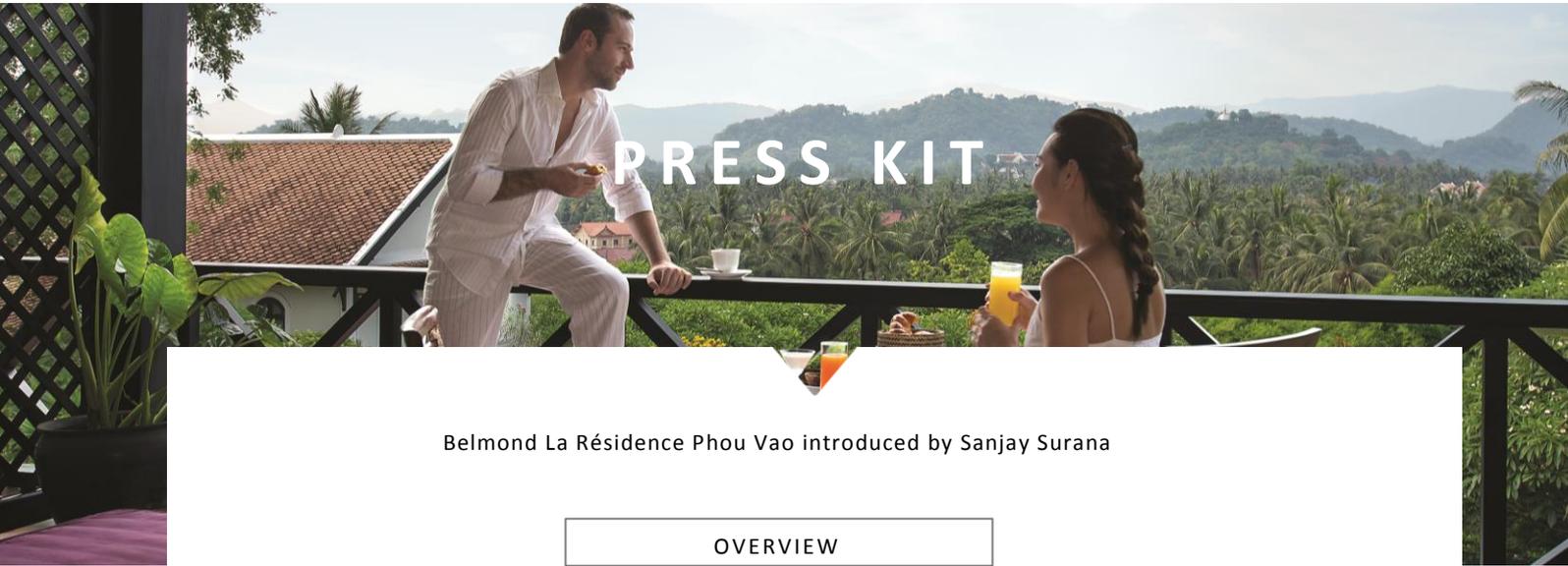




BELMOND
LA RÉSIDENCE PHOU VAO
LUANG PRABANG



Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao introduced by Sanjay Surana

OVERVIEW

Situated on a hill south of the Mekong River, Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao is blessed with the treetops and mountains of central Laos as its panorama. The Lilliputian hotel, with just 34 suites, is an oasis of calm, reflecting the ambience of Luang Prabang, once ancient capital of the Lan Xang kingdom and today a UNESCO World Heritage site prized for its striking architecture and easy-going vibe.

Designed with traditional Lao materials—plenty of teak, rosewood, silk, and cotton—and set in a quiet area among local houses, this former royal playground is surrounded by 3.7 hectares of carefully tended gardens. It's an immensely restorative place, one where the prevailing atmosphere is semi-rural—guests feel as though they are in the countryside—yet are only five minutes by tuk-tuk from the temples, markets, boutiques, restaurants, and bars in the heart of Luang Prabang.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

The name of the hotel refers to its location, Phou Vao translating to hill of kites. This was originally a site where, pre-revolution, young Laotian princes would come to fly kites, communing with the elements in their own form of spatial meditation. Part of the hotel building was constructed between 1970-1975, combining disciplines of Lao and French architecture, and used as a place where royalty would stay. The project remained incomplete by the time the monarchy was abolished and the country underwent political transition, and for a few years the Lao government took over the property, turning it into accommodation for official visits. By the early 1980s the structure was opened as the Mittaphap (Friendship) Hotel, and later became the Pansea Luang Prabang. As part of a renovation in 1997, a temple wall was built on the property, which remains today. Belmond (previously Orient-Express Hotels) took over in 2004.

Guests arrive at an open-air reception with shiny wood floors, gently whirring ceiling fans and comfortable seating areas with low-slung tables which create the feel of a home away from home. All is calm and quiet, the serenity a constant here. Nearby is a small library with an open fire and a garden. In the cooler months, guests often take a book and settle by the fire, letting the hours drift by. The gardens are a defining part of the hotel, enjoyed from numerous benches where guests can relax and soak up the surroundings. An equally tranquil place to appreciate the setting is the hotel's 13-metre, freshwater swimming pool. Stopping dramatically on a cliff edge, it affords fine, unobstructed views of the mountain ridges unfurling ahead in the distance.

The garden-view junior suites, located on the ground floor and thus easily accessed, have parquet floors, rosewood furnishings and local fabrics, and are surrounded by papyrus plants, bougainvillea vines and frangipani trees. Each one's private tree-shaded terrace offers views across the gardens. Other junior suites have similar sensibilities, but come with vistas of the mountains or pool. Garden suites are larger, with a separate living room.

The location is restorative and even energising—on the top of a mountain, with a view of Mount Phousi, the hill that rises 150 metres above Luang Prabang and where tourists congregate every sunset. Being up high creates a sort of spiritual apex that prompts most guests to spend much of their time within the resort, with short trips into Luang Prabang or the occasional excursion further afield. At night the sky comes alive, speckled with thousands of stars, their clarity intensified by the lack of competing ambient light.

Many visitors to Laos have likened the country to Thailand 30 years ago. The people here are welcoming and open, and society operates much as it has for centuries. Every morning monks shuffle through the town's street dressed in sunny saffron uttarasanga robes, collecting their alms for the day, according to long-held custom. Religion continues to play a defining role in the country; here in Laos the spiritualism is palpable and touches all aspects of daily life. The spa, a cluster of small Laotian houses—some with outdoor terraces—a steam room, plunge pool and spaces for yoga, sits next to a tranquil lily pond.

The staff are naturally welcoming and fiercely proud of their country. They will happily share stories of their homeland with guests—like the employee who excitedly explains how his mother makes silk in a small village in the countryside. Many are strongly loyal to the resort—the average employee has worked here for 15 years.

The quiet setting is popular with couples seeking to spend time together without distraction. One of the most sought-after experiences is the romantic dinner that features 500 candles arrayed through the resort's gardens. Guests are seated beside the lotus ponds or on a private veranda; local musicians play traditional melodies as the candles glimmer beneath the stars.

PEOPLE

Thomas Henseler. General Manager

Formerly the General Manager at the Belmond Governor's Residence in Yangon, Thomas Henseler recently switched into the same role for Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao. Growing up in Germany, he had his heart set on being a mechanic, but his grandmother, who had lived through World War II, felt that he should be a chef, so that he would always be near food and never be hungry. For a Christmas present the year before he graduated from school, his parents gave him a set of knives, a gift that set him on his career path. He trained and worked as a chef in Germany and went to hotel school in Heidelberg, southwest Germany, after which he moved overseas. His work saw him cooking in hotel kitchens in Malaysia, Indonesia, Uzbekistan and Egypt. He says: "Asian culture and Asian cooking were new to me, so I learned about a lot of new ingredients and cooking techniques." He also learned other important lessons about the hotel business along the way. "In Malaysia in 1995, I assisted in the opening of one of the first eco-resorts, which had no TV and no mini-bar in the rooms. The problem was that the mostly Asian clientele wanted entertainment and cold beer in the room!"

Henseler spent years working in Mexico and Peru, transitioning from the kitchen to director of Food and Beverage, and adding Spanish to his repertoire of fluent German and English, and passable Russian and Bahasa. He enjoyed his five years in Myanmar, which has "still remained largely untouched outside the large cities," but is excited to be moving to the property in Luang Prabang. "It is so remote and a true jewel, and in combination with the super-kind, local population, it's the perfect spot to relax and pamper yourself." A lively, good-humoured man, with a soft spot for motorbikes, cigars and outdoor activities, he is a wellspring of thought-provoking, interesting, and entertaining stories. "In Uzbekistan, the government froze the U.S. account of the hotel where I was working, so for two months we had to pay the staff in imported foods—they had no money but did have Swiss chocolate, Scottish salmon and French veal loin as salaries."

Souk Suliyaphone, Assistant Front Office Manager

Souk Suliyaphone might be the Assistant Front Office Manager at Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao, but his career originally took a completely different direction. One of 10 children born to a family of Laotian farmers, he grew up in a village near the northern border with China. According to Buddhist beliefs, a son must train to be a monk at for at least one period in his life, to return the kindness of his parents and to bring them happiness and prosperity. When he turned 13, shortly after his uncle had built a new temple for the village, he was asked to become one its first novices. Since it also had a school, it was the perfect chance for him to combine his religious duties with the continuation of his studies. Having shaved his head in the traditional way, he quickly embraced life as a monk, observing its many rituals. He admits that the first three weeks were hard: he had to wake up at 4am, eat just two meals a day, go out barefoot every morning for alms collection (the winters were very cold!) and kneel before the abbot every morning and evening for prayers.

He came to Luang Prabang in 1985 in order to continue his Buddhist studies at the town's most important temple, Wat Mai Suwannaphumaham. While there, Suliyaphone attended an English class taught by a senior trainee. He didn't speak a word of English, but listened intently. When, later that day, a tourist came to the temple and spoke English to the monks, he was hooked—and started taking lessons every day. In 1998, at the age of 18, he became a monk, and began to follow an even stricter routine. He was later promoted to sub-abbot, responsible for 25 trainees, and continued to serve until 2005, when he felt that he had given sufficiently to the faith. He ceased to be a monk, found work, and eventually, in 2011, joined Belmond. Now, in addition to his designated duties, he uses lessons gleaned from his past to accompany guests on Mekong River meditation voyages, leads the Baci ceremony and participates during evening ceremonies at the hotel's temple. He is also a fount of knowledge for guests and staff on the theory and practice of Buddhism.

EXPERIENCES

A journey along the Mekong River is a must for visitors to Luang Prabang—and is easily arranged aboard the hotel's own boat which is equipped with gleaming wood floors, armchairs and long, comfortable day beds. The signature sailing to Pak Ou Cave is hugely popular—advance reservations are recommended—and is offered as a half- or full-day trip. The boat passes villages on the river banks that most tourists never see, before arriving at caves filled with thousands of Buddha statues, ranging in height from a few centimetres to human size. The full-day tour takes in the famous pottery village Ban Cha, and Ban Xang Khong, a village where rice paper and textiles are crafted. Following a picnic lunch on an island in the middle of the Mekong River, there is the opportunity to stop at Ban Xang Hai village, where Lao-Lao rice whisky is produced.

Giving alms to monks at daybreak in Luang Prabang has become such a popular activity for visitors that the spiritual purity of the act has been diluted. Far more special is the ancestral ceremony known as Baci (pronounced batch-ee) that celebrates special events like a wedding, homecoming, birth or annual festival. This is possibly the oldest and most traditional Lao ceremony, and one that the hotel can arrange for guests who want to commemorate a special occasion or simply take home a lasting memory. Hosted by the senior village shaman or Assistant Front Office Manager and former monk Souk Suliyaphone, it bestows blessings for health and prosperity while tying holy cotton threads to participants' wrists. The ceremony aims to restore the natural order of living things and to bring communities closer together.

Started four years ago by a former general manager who was a competitive archer and former archery teacher, Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao offers guests a chance to aim a bow and arrow at a distant target board. It might seem surprising to discover this sport in Laos, but archery requires almost meditative concentration—for which the hotel's tranquil gardens are ideal.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT

Green Thursdays

Every Thursday at Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao, the staff set out on tuk-tuks to collect litter, waste and discarded plastic to help keep Luang Prabang clean and unpolluted.

Known as 'Green Thursday', this private initiative was the first of its kind in the area, as residents and businesses can rarely afford to pay for private litter collection. While collecting the rubbish, staff also take time to speak with Lao people and tourists, to raise environmental awareness and maintain the beauty of the local surroundings.

The Orphanage

The Luang Prabang Government Orphanage School serves a population of 500 children. Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao regularly provides blankets, books, pencils, food and drink to the centre, as well as organising regular activities to bring some fun into the children's lives. The hotel also strives to create work opportunities by offering hospitality internships to the older children.