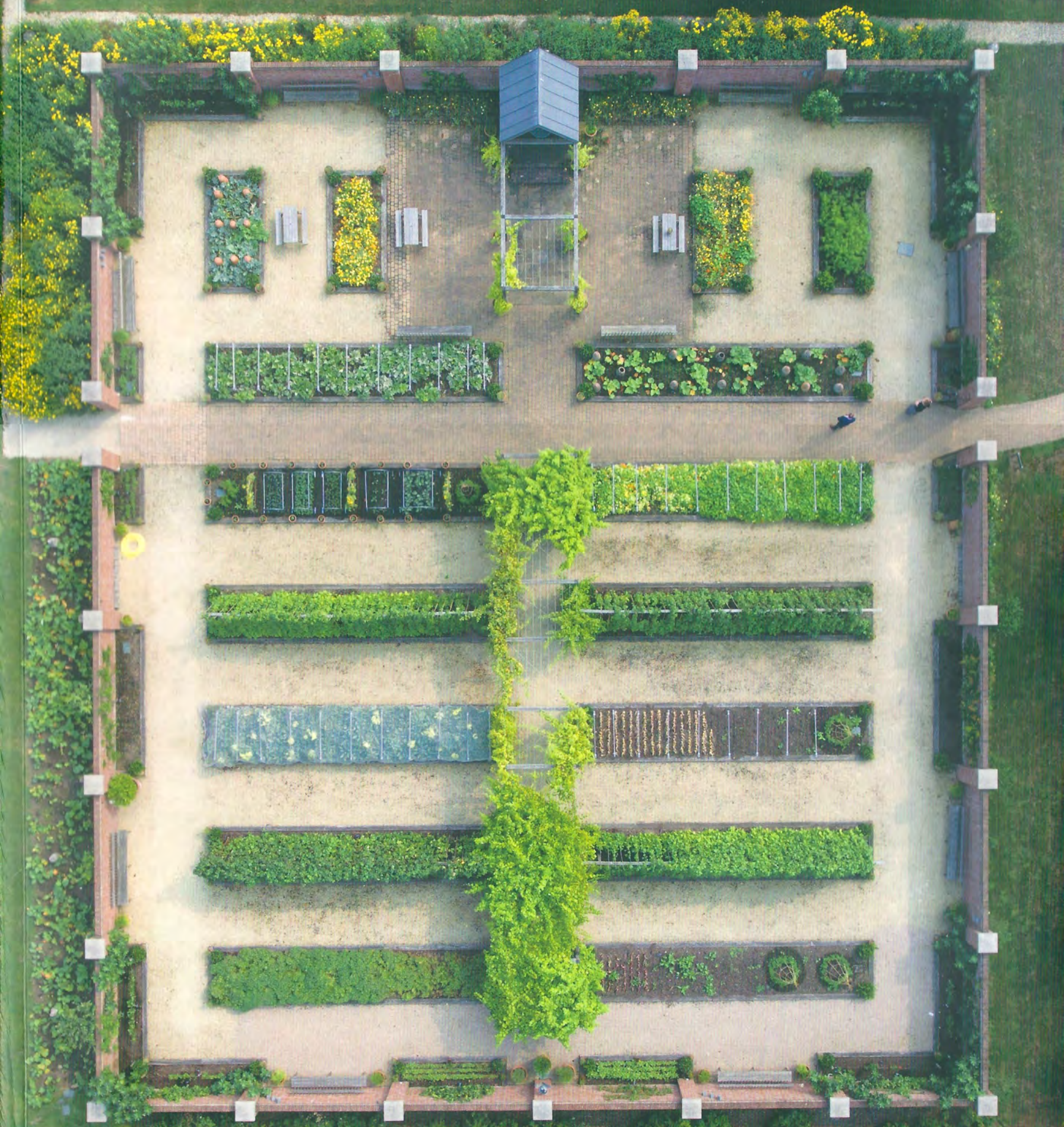


CHEWTON GLEN

HAMPSHIRE





THE SPIRIT OF PLACE

CAROLINE PHILLIPS FINDS HERSELF LOST IN WONDER IN LAOS



The men in saffron robes walk the streets holding out their begging bowls. It is called tak bat. I get up at 5.30am to see it. The monasteries are empty and their monks are seeking alms. The pious – and tourists – sit on low plastic stools, as if kneeling, and hand out sticky balls of rice and cereal bars to these holy men. In this way, the former gain spiritual merit and the latter demonstrate their vows of poverty and humility.

We are in Luang Prabang, in northern Laos – a landlocked country of mist-tipped mountains, tropical and subtropical forests and the mighty Mekong River. Luang Prabang is the former royal capital, a UNESCO heritage site of more than 30 gilded wats (temples) at the sacred confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan River. It is a place known for its

royal history, frangipani trees and French cuisine, for its weathered French Colonial shop fronts and faded Indochine villas.

We have come here on the RV Laos Pandaw: a teak decked, colonial-style ship on its new 10-day Laos Mekong cruise from Chiang Khong (Thailand) to Vientiane (Laos). There are 16 passengers and nearly as many crew.

To get to Luang Prabang, we have cruised downstream past majestic mountains, buffalo wallowing at the riverside, slow boats and fishermen on deserted white beaches fishing with traditional tha khaek nets; and past rubber plantations, banana trees, bamboo and locals sieving for gold.

Mostly I have sat at the bow by the shrine the crew have made with rice offerings, marigolds and incense. (They believe that spirits are always close by.) Sometimes ours was the only pleasure boat on the



IT IS A FULL MOON AND THE GOLDEN TEMPLES – GLOWING IN THE SETTING SUN – ARE FULL OF CHANTING MONKS.

brown river that cuts a swathe through the heart of the country. The captain negotiated the rocky Mekong and rapids with expertise. In the dry season, when the water level is low, there is a risk of running aground on submerged sand banks.

But now we are in Luang Prabang. Our guide, Somdy, comes from this city and was a monk from age 10 to 22: “Look, my toes very splayed from not wear shoes when I was young,” he says. He wants to become a monk again. “But my wife wants me to build her a house instead.”

He shows us temples with exotic names and elaborate red and gold pointy roofs adorned with serpents and dragons, plus monumental golden Buddhas, red columns with gold leaf, and genuflecting locals.

“Please you donate to support the novice education wish the best bless to be with you,” reads the notice on the donations box.

He takes us to the early 20th century Royal Palace where (as with the temples)

we take off our shoes. Inside he points out the royal bedrooms of the deposed king and queen. “All royals sleep in separate beds,” he announces authoritatively. The museum (as it is also known) contains a collection of 15th to 18th century Buddha statues and ancient bronze drums from Wat Visoun. Nearby is a garage that houses the king’s dusty collection of classic cars.

Afterwards I climb Mount Phousi alone: 328 steps up a gigantic rock to a gold-spired stupa. From the peak there is a panorama over the city. At the bottom, there are tiny birds for sale in weeny bamboo cages. Setting them free at the top is said to bring good luck.

As dusk falls on the city, hill tribespeople set up the night market on the pavement by the palace. “Sabaidee” – the vendors utter the word for hello in Lao. Meanwhile tourists bargain over teak bowls, Buddhas and handmade notebooks decorated with elephants.



When I want smarter shopping, I go to Ock Pop Tok, a social enterprise. Here there are beautiful hand dyed scarves and exquisite artisan silk wall hangings. They are hand woven on traditional looms by local hill tribespeople and sell for millions of kip (the local currency); that is over a thousand dollars.

The sights near Luang Prabang are also worth visiting. Upstream are the renowned Pak Ou caves. Here we negotiate hundreds of steps up the white limestone cliffs and see 4,000 Buddhas – 18th to 21st century ones of wood, lacquer and bronze – in two caves. Lion figures guard the entry. On the way down, a live green snake is dangling, watching from a tree.

On the drive next day to the Kuang Si waterfall, 30km south of the city, we pass banana trees, stilt houses, paddy fields and mothers on motorbikes, their children strapped to their chests, and nobody wearing helmets. The waterfalls splash into aquamarine

poools, their colour derived from copper in the rock. It is the local public swimming pool.

I walk alone in a moist evergreen forest full of ferns above the falls. Laos is home to many endangered species like the large antlered muntjac, the Indochinese tiger and the Asiatic bear. But this particular forest is the habitat only of snakes, mouse deer and butterflies and it is eerily quiet, with not even the sound of birdsong.

After an hour, I descend to a village at the foot of the forest where tribeswomen sell barbecued fish, whole chickens and maize cooked over charcoal. Plus there are stalls selling crispy Mekong riverweed, fried bamboo shoots and tamarind jam. “Sabaidee,” “Sabaidee,” “Sabaidee,” they say in succession.

One day on the ship, 10 locals (including musicians) come on board to do a Baci cleansing ceremony – offering silver bowls of bananas, coconut sweets and rice wine to the spirits. They chant for good luck and blessings, and tie 14 blessed strings around

our wrists. “If you take them off, you must not cut them,” says the purser. “And you must put them somewhere special, not just throw on the ground.”

It is time to bid farewell to Luang Prabang. It is a full moon and the golden temples – glowing in the setting sun – are full of chanting monks. The smell of incense wafts into the warm night air. The sound of holy men fills my ears.

In the morning the RV Laos Pandaw will float downstream past longtail taxi boats, occasional elephants bathing with their mahouts and the book boat library that sails to remote villages. More adventure on the snaking Mekong.

Regent Holidays offer a 17-day trip to Laos including a Mekong cruise with Pandaw Cruises.
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