

Laos National Day Special

Honoring prosperity through diverse, age-old cities

In celebrating the 43rd anniversary of the proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on Dec. 2, *The Japan Times* has selected some of the cultural highlights of two cities in Laos, the Southeast Asian inland state known as "The Land of a Million Elephants." Below are edited excerpts from the official tourism website <http://www.tourismlaos.org>.

Vientiane, Laos's capital, is located on the Mekong River near the border to Thailand. Although Vientiane is the largest city of Laos with a population of about 800,000, it has a laid-back and friendly atmosphere, in stark contrast to the bustling capitals of countries in the other parts of Southeast Asia. With French influences from colonial days, Vientiane is best enjoyed by the riverside, drinking Laos-style coffee or refreshing Beer Lao at cafes overlooking amazing views of sunsets over the Mekong.

During the day, a number of temples in Vientiane offer spectacular architecture and decor. Among them, That Luang, an icon of Vientiane, shines luminously with its golden towers standing against blue skies.

French cultural legacy in architecture is visible in Patuxay, a near-replica of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The construction of this tower commemorating soldiers who fought for Laos began in 1957 and remains incomplete. However, visitors can still go to the top of the tower and enjoy the great views of Vientiane and the surrounding forests.

Besides Vientiane, Luang Prabang is the most well-known city in Laos and was included in *The New York Times* annual 52 Places To Go edition of its travel section this year.

Situated in the center of northern Laos, Luang Prabang is one of two UNESCO World

Heritage sites in the country, and its outstanding cultural and historic value has attracted an increasing number of tourists from other countries.

In the 14th century, the first Lao Kingdom, Lane Xang, meaning "Million Elephants," was founded in Luang Prabang and remained as the kingdom's capital until the mid 16th century when it was moved to Vientiane. Even after that, Luang Prabang has served as the country's spiritual center and the charm of this ancient town has never faded over the centuries.

To recall the prosperity of the kingdom, it is best to visit the Royal Palace Museum in the former palace building, which was constructed in 1904 during the French colonial era. The museum exhibits items from the era, such as gorgeous furniture of the royal family and gifts to the kings brought by delegations of other countries.

The kings shared a deep belief in Buddhism and constructed a number of temples in Luang Prabang, many of which have been excellently preserved. Among them, Wat

Xieng Thong, translated to "Temple of the Golden City," is known as the symbol of Luang Prabang. The temple's hall roofs that elegantly sweep low to the ground and the jewel-like mosaic on its back exterior wall are both well worth seeing.

Not restricted to temples in Luang Prabang, but in everyday life, Buddhism plays an important role in the ancient town and other parts of Laos. To appreciate this best in Luang Prabang, tourists should wake early in the morning and go to see alms giving ceremonies in which local people line up and give food to monks in procession on the main streets of the town. Visitors are encouraged to be involved as long as they show proper respect throughout the ceremony.

While Luang Prabang is full of sacred traditions like alms giving, the town's secular cultures also have powerful appeals. The night bazaar, for example, is something visitors shouldn't miss — this lively market where merchants from local tribes sell various clothes and handicrafts made of traditional textiles provides an enjoyable look into the

country's rich culture.

In addition to these cultural heritages in Luang Prabang and Vientiane, Laos boasts a number of rich cultural and natural assets such as the Champasak cultural landscape, another UNESCO World Heritage site.

Congratulations on anniversary

VIROTH SUNDARA

AMBASSADOR OF THE LAO PDR

On the 43rd anniversary of the proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) on Dec. 2, let me convey

greetings from His Excellency President of the Lao PDR Bounnhang Vorachit and the Lao people to Their Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the people of Japan.



Top: Wat Xieng Thong, meaning "Temple of the Golden City," is the symbol of Luang Prabang. Above: In Vientiane, sunsets over the Mekong River can be a sight to behold at riverside cafes.

EMBASSY OF THE LAO PDR/ GETTY IMAGES

Congratulations
to the Lao People's Democratic Republic
on the 43rd Anniversary of Their National Day

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to the Lao People's Democratic Republic
on the 43rd Anniversary of their National Day

JAPAN-LAOS ASSOCIATION
President: Itsuo Hashimoto
Former Ambassador to Lao PDR

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