

On the road with McDang



ROAST STUFFED quail served with veggies at L'Elephant.

Dining in lovely Laos

THIS WEEKEND, MY COLUMN is more in keeping with its title "On the road with McDang". During the religious holiday of Maka Bucha last month, I took the opportunity to get away from Bangkok and return once again to lovely Luang Prabang.

Since Bangkok Airways began offering direct flights to this charming city, I have gone there countless times over the past three years. There is something that always draws me to the city - perhaps it's a longing for the slower and simpler way of life that Thailand used to have. I also have Lao blood on my mother's side, not from Luang Prabang but Vientiane: the Malakoul family members are descendants of King Rama II of Thailand and a Lao princess.

Each time I go to Luang Prabang I think of my early years in Bangkok 50 years ago. It was a much simpler time, when everyone knew everyone else. Bangkokians were much kinder then. Less materialistic and not slaves to money. Well, I am happy to report that those feelings of longing for the olden days in Thailand are alive and well in Luang Prabang.

Despite the increase in tourism and the city's ever-growing popularity, the inhabitants of Luang Prabang are still the same gentle people. Thanks to Unesco for making this a world heritage city, as changes come about slowly and are well controlled. I still love the fact that there are no ATM machines in Luang Prabang.

On my last trip, I went to a temple to take part in a religious ceremony for Maka Bucha. The ceremony celebrates the day that the Lord Buddha preached his first sermon. This time there were prayers and sermons in the evening, which ended with a candle light procession three times around the temple.

Everyone's faces were lit by the candlelight, and there seemed to be a glow on all of us. Everyone was dressed in traditional Lao attire. After the ceremony, I went to a new happening in Luang Prabang: the evening market.

To create the market, they closed off a section of the main road in town from the museum to the water fountain intersection. All kinds of goods were on sale there, as well as food stalls. Local Laotian food, barbecue and some Vietnamese spring rolls were on sale and ready to be consumed by the many foreign visitors.

It was noisy, busy and smoky, but lots of fun. I was surprised to see so many Westerners eating at these stalls looking as if they were natives of Luang Prabang. The sights, sounds and aromas of this marketplace made me want to join in and sample the food, too. But I had already booked a table at L'Elephant, so off I went for some French cuisine.

First attracted by the decor of the restaurant, I'd eaten there many times mostly because the majority of the menu items were remarkably delicious and good value for money. The owner of the restaurant is half French and half Lao. His father owned the building and his son returned to open two restaurants when Luang Prabang opened up for tourism.

This is an oasis of culture - a place where two cultures meet. It takes you back to the French colonial times. At the same time, it has its own identity and that inimitable Laotian charm. It is sophisticated without being pretentious. Of the food, I'll just mention a few items.

I particularly enjoy the water-buffalo steak or the stuffed quail. The baked Brie was great but two persons could eat it. The desserts are very French. Try the Creme caramel - *ca, c'est délicieux!* The wine list is also quite good for Luang Prabang and the prices are reasonable, all in US dollars.

After a great meal and a good night's sleep I went to the waterfall, which most tourists don't visit. We hired a tuk tuk to the river outside town and took the boat to the waterfall. This is not the season to go to Tad Xae fall, but there is still enough water left to go for a swim. Tad Xae is a series of terraces in the woods with very large trees and pools around the whole area.

Water runs past these terrace pools and, during the monsoon, flows over the whole area making it appear like a large, over-flowing pool with massive trees growing out of it. The water is very clear and refreshingly cool. Come weekends the place is teeming with locals who bring their families here for picnics.

I don't know about you, but I could go back to Luang Prabang again and again. There are so many places to stay - from the Grand, Pansea and Villa Santi to smaller more intimate guesthouses. Food in Luang Prabang is good and fairly inexpensive. Local cuisine, such as papaya salad, *tum buck houng*, is good everywhere and cheap, but if you don't want MSG or are allergic to it as I am, just tell them not to put *pang nuoa* (Lao for MSG) in your food and they will not do so.



A SCRUMPTIOUS plate of water-buffalo steak.



Dining Details

L'Elephant
Bna Vat Nong, PO Box 812
Luang Prabang, Laos
Tel: (856-71) 252-482
Open: 6 to 10pm

McDang Guide

Taste	★★★★
Hygiene	★★★★
Quality of raw materials	★★★★
Service	★★★★
Price	★★★★

Monosodium glutamate is so popular with all cooks in Laos, Vietnam, Burma - I guess the whole of Southeast Asia - that you need to instruct the restaurants you eat at not to use it for your dish. Some cooks told me that they don't know what the food would taste like if they didn't add MSG to it. All you have to do is reassure them that it's just as delicious. Or as the Lao say, "*sab lai!*"