

A COLONIAL GEM

The soothing luxury of the Settha Palace makes it an ideal base from which to explore the rest of Vientiane's many charms, says **Loshini Catherine John**.

Photos Settha Palace

ABOVE: The Settha Palace is an oasis of calm.

RIGHT: 1. A London cab readily waiting for you at Settha Palace.
2 & 3. Colonial charm pervades Settha Palace's ambience.

Think holidaying in South-East Asia and the first things that come to mind are usually the islands surrounding Thailand, the party scene and spa culture of luxury resorts in Bali, the shopping and gastronomical delights of Singapore and, not forgetting, of course, the five-star resorts of Langkawi. Vientiane, perhaps, remains the most unassuming destination and the last choice one would pick as, aside from the food, it has none of the above to offer. However, having experienced the wonders of land-locked Laos first hand, it's hard not to fall in love with this charming and unpretentious land that has remains of French colonialism in every corner. The allure of Vientiane, however, does not hit you immediately, unlike the more famous Laotian city, Luang Prabang. Instead, the charisma of Vientiane unfolds slowly as you discover it bit by bit.

One of the most alluring places to stay in Vientiane, situated a mere 10 minutes from the airport and within walking distance of the Mekong river, is Settha Palace. Located in the middle of this 'city', the charming resort is surrounded by gardens and ideal for those looking to escape from the rat race. Settha Palace takes you back in time as life moves in a much slower pace here, allowing you to sit back and soak up nothing but comfort and calmness that the surroundings emanate.

This plush boutique resort, befitting its name, was once the pride of the French residing in this former colony of theirs. It has since been restored and now exudes a tranquil feeling of escapism with a hint of opulence the minute you walk in. Similar to perhaps other Asian gems like the E & O of Penang, the Oriental Bangkok or even the Raffles in Singapore, Settha Palace finds a way into your heart at once as it gives you a sense of old-school charm with modern-day amenities that help you to unwind for that perfect holiday.

Whether you choose to sit by the pool and have the ever-willing staff bring you a charming bottle of Bordeaux, or while the afternoon away in the comforts of your four-poster bed, the choice is entirely yours as Vientiane culture puts no pressure nor agenda on you. Furnished with just 29 rooms,





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you don't have to worry about over-crowded pools or making reservations for dinner at the Belle Epoque Restaurant downstairs, as the cosy boutique hotel is made to cater only to your needs.

The resort is by far Vientiane's proudest asset. First opened in 1932 by the colonial authorities who ruled Laos as part of French Indochina, the Settha was converted into government housing after the communist takeover in 1975. That, however, did not see the end of this beautiful colonial building. Just 10 years ago, French-Laotian entrepreneur, Billy Theodas, took charge of the hotel and spent USD3.1 million in renovation. For Theodas, restoring the hotel was perhaps instigated by personal attachment as his parents both ran the hotel and lived there prior to the communist takeover.

Back in the day, Settha Palace was *the* place; the eatery downstairs, pretty much modelled after Parisian cafes, used to be the most impressive and lively haunt there was. Unfortunately, after the communist takeover, there was not much left of the building except for cracks on the wall and a falling roof. The dilapidated building, however, was fully restored thanks to the passion and determination of Theodas who restored Settha to what it was once - an abode fit for kings. The hippest residence in developing Vientiane, Settha is fast becoming the must-stay place for the elite and discerning. While it has taken him more time and effort than he had bargained for, the hotel is starting to draw a hip and happening crowd.

Despite the slow pace of life in Vientiane, Settha Palace gives you a warm if not, settled, feeling of comfort when you are within the confines of the building. From soft classical music that echoes through the hallways and a spiral stairway that takes you up to your old-world room, the building has been beautifully refurbished while amenities have been well maintained in order to please guests. Hospitality, of course, remains the main priority here with staff waiting on you hand and foot. The bell-boy willingly doubles up as the driver should

you need a ride into town in the London cab waiting at the premises and, with a simple phone call, you can be assured of quality service despite the language barrier.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect to the hotel is the fine cuisine offered in the restaurant downstairs. Although the nearby eateries offer a fine selection of local and French cuisine for a song, the restaurant itself caters to tourists who want to savour the delicacy of Laotian cooking. Spicy minced meat served with fragrant white rice and fresh vegetables with tiny chillies are usually the order of the day. Not forgetting, of course, the selection of waffles, cold cuts, fruit and yogurt that adorn the buffet table at breakfast. Impressively enough, the hotel has a decent selection of wines.

When tired of wining and dining, be it at the hotel's Belle Epoque Restaurant or the cosy adjacent French café, there is always the many beer gardens to choose from. In a country where beer flows like water, you can take a break from delectable French wines and bask in the afternoon sun with a cleansing ale or two.

While there is no ocean front for you to view as you sit back and sip champagne, there is always the Mekong, along where a host of restaurants have opened, offering a wide selection of local dishes to savour. Sit back, enjoy the evening breeze under the twinkling stars and take in the wonders of the river as you feast on a meal that is as fabulous as your surroundings.

High season in Vientiane is from October to April, when the weather is cool and many tourists flock to this Asian destination, yet the place remains uncluttered and offers you perfect escape without having to share your space with others. ■

WHERE

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LEFT: 4. Sunrise over the majestic Mekong River. 5. Laotians ready for a boat race. 6. Vientiane's Sisaket Museum.