

THE GET

In Laos, It's all About Weave

By Sandra Ballentine
September 23, 2007

For many years the ancient silk-weaving tradition of Laos was stifled under the Communist regime that took over the country in 1975. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party saw no need for the elaborate hand-woven silks that Laotians (mostly women) had been making since at least the 14th century. With members of the country's royal family confined to "re-education" camps and with wealthy Laotians in exile, the market for lavish, labor-intensive fabrics dried up. Today, however, with the government amenable to entrepreneurship and tourism, affluent and educated Lao expats, as well as conservation-minded foreigners, have revived this once-endangered art.

The first stop on any silk route should be Vientiane, Laos's capital, which is usually overlooked for the more picturesque town of Luang Prabang, with its historic temples, French colonial architecture and saffron-robed monks. But it is in Vientiane where you find couture-quality textiles rather than the cheaper fabrics aimed at the tourist trade.

Oudone Phimphrachanh returned to her native Vientiane from Paris in the early 1990s and set up a silk-weaving atelier on the lush grounds of her villa just outside the center of town. A member of one of Laos's oldest families, Phimphrachanh runs a small 12-loom operation that turns out high-end silks. Modeling an exquisite *sinh* (the traditional Lao sarong) of her own design, she shoos away Hermès, her Doberman, and offers visitors mulberry green tea while they survey racks of scarves and shawls. "The tea will cool you down," she says, her voice barely audible over the din of songbirds in the garden.

Phimphrachanh is known for her refined palette, which she creates by using dyes made almost exclusively from local flora and fauna instead of from the chemicals that produce the brassy hues found in the morning market. If it's crimson she's after, she uses crushed cochineal insects. Dark red comes from tamarind bark; for black, the most difficult color to achieve naturally, she experiments with barks and mud. The only nonindigenous ingredient she uses, an indigo powder from France, is for her signature pale-blue shades. (She is so color-obsessed that when the Lao humidity takes a toll on the paint of her candy pink 1974 Volkswagen Beetle, she orders the original shade from Germany.) Her clients include government officials, ambassadors' wives, Thai and Brunei royalty, and international fashion designers, but commerce

isn't her endgame. "I'm not a professional," she says. "I just love making beautiful, meaningful things."

Nearby is Carol Cassidy, an American weaver who started Lao Textiles in Vientiane in 1990 and is credited with helping spur international interest in the art form.

At her studio in a French colonial villa in the city center, she oversees a staff of 50 weavers, spinners, dyers and assistants. Her clients appreciate the modern riffs on traditional techniques like tapestry, ikat and supplementary weft. "I wanted to help make the extraordinary skill and weaving traditions of Lao artisans commercially viable," she says. "But in order to be sustainable, you need to respond to the market."

Customers like the architects Peter Marino, Alan Wanzenberg and Michael Graves were looking for more ambitious pieces than the typical scarf or wall hanging in patterns that weren't too ethnic or crafty, such as depictions of animals or mythical creatures that are popular with Laotians. So Cassidy designed a loom capable of producing long, wide swaths of upholstery fabric and started doing custom interior installations for residences worldwide. These projects can take six full-time weavers more than a year to complete.

Sandra Yuck, who has shops in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, is another foreigner who came here to help revive the ancient art; she notes that tourism's positive effect on business has actually sparked a decline in the quality of silks being sold and produced, especially in Luang Prabang. "A lot of weavers are making things too fast to meet demand and not making them well," Yuck says.

In Luang Prabang, Yuck often collaborates with Prince Nithakong Somsanith, who is something of the Lesage of Laos. He has used her lustrous silks as canvases for intricate gold- and silver-thread embroidery, a nearly extinct royal art he learned growing up in court. In the Puang Champa House, a restored residence where Somsanith lives half the year, he is training seven embroidery apprentices to help keep the technique alive. He also hopes to set up a workshop in Luang Prabang that will embroider for haute couture houses.

Not far from Luang Prabang is the tiny weaving village of Phonesay. You have to cross a rickety, suspended wooden bridge and then dodge chickens on a dirt road to reach it, but here you can see weaving at its most traditional. As they have for hundreds of years,

the women mind the children and weave in their bamboo-and-thatch houses all day while the men fish the Mekong River. Phongsamout Simoukda, one of Phonesay's new entrepreneurs, employs 10 young women in her weaving studio. Everyone has a task. The most experienced create patterns by inserting rods into the warp, which form the pattern, while the youngest girls carefully wind silk onto wooden bobbins, and older ones deftly pull threads through the combs of their looms. They do so quietly, all day. Aimed more at the tourist market, the designs here aren't especially complex. Still, it's difficult to imagine sitting in one place long enough to produce even the simplest scarf, which can take a whole day. Watching the women work is mesmerizing.

As Yuck says, "To witness someone setting up a loom by hand, which can take up to two weeks for a complicated pattern, and then watch them calmly sit down to weave the design slowly and methodically, for up to six months, is a meditation."

ESSENTIALS LAOS

Before You Go

The best time to visit is from November through February. **Pallavi Shah's Our Personal Quest** does excellent custom tours in the region (nyoffice@ourpersonalquest.com); her services aren't inexpensive, so cost-conscious travelers could connect directly with **Trails of Indochina**, one of the better tour companies (www.trailsofindochina.com).

Vientiane

Stay at the **Settha Palace Hotel**, a French colonial grande dame (www.setthapalace.com; doubles from \$128) or **Green Park Boutique Hotel** (www.greenparkvientiane.com; doubles from \$100). The best textile sources are **Oudone Phimphrachanh's atelier** (by appointment; Ban Dongpalane; 011-856-21-415-598; www.oudone.com); **Lao Textiles**, Carol Cassidy's showroom and workshop (Nokeo Khoumane Road, Ban Mixay; 011-856-21-212-123; www.laotextiles.com); **Phaeng Mai Gallery** for silk scarves and wall hangings and workroom tours (117 Nongbouathong Tai, 011-856-21-217-341); and **Kanchana** for Bouasonkham Sisane's chic traditional offerings (140 Samsenthai Road, Thatdam Square; 011-856-21-213-467; kanchana_sisane@hotmail.com). Sisane's family also owns the adjacent **Lao Textile Museum**. **Talat Sao**, Vientiane's morning market, is open until late afternoon and has textiles at very reasonable prices. Quality antique pieces are difficult to find: try Madam Chanthone Thatanakhom's **Antique Lao Textiles**; she has a stall in the market, but the real treasures are at her home (by appointment; 011-856-21-312-390).

Luang Prabang

Base yourself at one of the city's stylish hotels: **La Résidence Phou Vao**, just outside town (www.residencephouvao.com; doubles from \$254), or **Maison Souvannaphoum**, a former royal residence in the center (www.coloursofangsana.com; doubles from \$140).

The best textile sources are Sandra Yuck's elegant **Caruso Lao Home Craft** (60 Sakaline Road, Ban Vat Sene; 011-856-71-254-574; www.carusolao.com); **Lao Textiles Collection** (14/6 Ban Xieng Mouane, Sisavangvong Road; 011-856-71-253-267); and **Ock Pop Tok**, for antique and new textiles, and its adjacent exhibition space, **Fibre2Fabric Gallery** (73/5 Ounkham Road, Ban Vat Nong; 011-856-71-253-219; www.ockpoptok.com). Ock Pop Tok also gives weaving lessons in its workshop outside town. The **Puang Champa House** showcases royal art forms, from embroidery to musical instruments (by appointment; Heuan Chan Road, Ban Xieng Mouane; 011-856-71-254-787; puangchampa@yahoo.com); to commission gold-embroidered scarves and jackets from Prince Somsanith (\$1,000 to \$5,000), e-mail tiaok somsanith@hotmail.fr. The night market sells souvenir-quality Lao silks, but beware of Chinese and Thai fakes.