



Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao

A mere 15-minute ride from Luang Prabang International Airport is Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao, a luxury hotel atop Phou Vao hill in the UNESCO World Heritage town of Luang Prabang, Laos. Phou Vao (meaning 'hill of kites') is believed to have been a favourite spot among Laotian princes who came here to fly their kites in days of old.

Although this site may no longer be the stomping grounds of carefree royals, Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao retains an air of elegance in its décor, which includes teak and rosewood furnishings that complement its traditional Lao and French architectural elements. Built in the 70s, the hotel features pointed roofs and rounded windows, while a standalone temple wall, which would be fitting at any of the myriad Buddhist temples in Luang Prabang, adds a mystical feel, as though serving as a boundary to a celestial realm.

For those who appreciate quietude, arriving at the lobby – an open-air expanse furnished with short couches and bathed in warm lighting – is a dream. Aside from welcome greetings called out by the friendly staff, the lobby is tranquil, without the clamour often associated

with hotel lobbies. The fact that the hotel houses a modest 34 guestrooms contributes much to this serene ambience, allowing guests to feel as if they have the hotel all to themselves, even at full capacity!


My stay for the weekend is the Mountain View Junior Suite, a 55sqm abode featuring warm wood furnishings; traditional textiles showcasing the beauty of Lao artistry; a free-form terrazzo bath; and large windows that overlook tropical gardens. Its terrace is thoughtfully furnished with cosy couches, allowing guests to lounge as they take in panoramic views from atop Phou Vao hill. From my vantage point, I spot Wat Tham Phou Si, a popular Buddhist temple and tourist destination. I spend so much time outside enjoying the view and the crisp hilltop air that indoor creature comforts – such as the satellite TV, iHome docking system, Espresso machine and stone bathtub – as well as amenities like the hotel's freshwater pool perched dramatically on the edge of a cliff and its delightful F&B outlets – are almost forgotten. Almost.

Phou Savanh, the hotel's main F&B outlet, which prides itself on offering inventive French cuisine with traditional Lao influences, provides a wonderful al fresco experience.

Though small, its menu boasts some truly delightful local dishes like *kao kop khua pak* (crispy stir-fried black rice served with tofu and vegetables) and *lon som* (Luang Prabang pork curry with fish roe, eggplant and long beans). Especially delicious is *chucci pa*, a lovely, mildly spicy and sweet orange curry with chunks of freshwater fish harvested from the Mekong, chickpeas and kaffir lime. The creamy, savoury base works well with the fish, which flakes off into juicy slivers of goodness. The coconut milk adds to the texture of the curry, and despite being a local dish, the aroma conjures memories of the coconut milk-based dishes back home in Malaysia. Another great treat is the *pet yang makham*, a dish of crispy duck breast drizzled with tamarind sauce. The combination of crispy skin and tender flesh mixed with the sweet sauce is a great play of textures and flavours.

When it comes to relaxation, the Mekong Spa is the place to be. Based on Lao herbal remedies, the spa's treatments range from *phonklai* (relaxing oil massage) to *sip sen* (traditional Lao massage). I opt for *mo hom* – a steamed indigo herbal compress – followed by a relaxing massage. The therapist pays attention to every detail and nuance, knowing full well that the little things matter when it comes to providing comfort and relaxation to the guests. Instead of the jolt that I always experience during compress treatments, my therapist helps my body acclimatise to the compress temperature by transferring the heat with her hands first. This makes all the difference in the world! When it comes time for the massage, it is apparent how well-versed the therapists here are in their craft. Not a single move is wasted, as every stroke serves to work out the knots in tight muscles, or hit the right pressure points, leaving me on the brink of slumber.

Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao ensures its guests a memorable stay, not just because of its hospitality, but also its willingness to go the extra mile to complement its stellar service – think pathways lined with eco-friendly candles, multiple reading nooks set up across its premises, and fresh French-pressed coffee at breakfast.

These coupled with its unique setting ensure that guests feel on top of the world!  **PHOU VAO ROAD, LUANG PRABANG, 84330LAO PDR**

