

Escape

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Tradition warms the heart and soul

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LAOS is a country that remains lost in time, retaining many traditions that seem to have disappeared in a frenzy of development elsewhere in the region.

Here you will discover a country untainted by mass tourism, an Asia in slow motion.

The magical Luang Prabang is a prime example of this, as hundreds of saffron-robed monks glide through the streets every morning in a call to alms, one of the region's iconic images.

A tradition that dates back to the 14th century, the alms giving ceremony takes place daily as the sun rises, beginning on the main street of Luang Prabang before spreading out to all the side streets.

Buddhist monks depart from temples in this UNESCO-listed town to gather their daily meal from locals who wake early to prepare the food and wait quietly by the roadside to give their gifts.

Travellers to the area can also take part in the ceremony. I sat patiently waiting with my basket, contemplating what

this simple meal of sticky rice meant to the monks and as they lined up to collect their share, I felt gratitude for being invited to take part in this age-old tradition.

In a heart-warming turn of events, I also bore witness to monks returning the favour and sharing some of their alms with children on the street so that they can take food back to their family.

This warming of the soul through simple gestures carries over to another ceremony specific to Laos, the Baci Ceremony.

Practised for hundreds of years, the ceremony involves the tying of white cotton strings around a person's wrists during a prayer saying or well-wishing for the person that the ceremony is intended for. The term commonly used for this is "sou khuan", which means "spirit enhancing or spirit calling".

The people of Laos believe that a human being is a union of 32 organs, each has a khuan (Lao word for spirit) to protect them. I am told that these spirits often wander outside the body causing an imbalance of the soul.



MARIGOLD TIME: The pha khuan is the centrepiece of the Laotian Baci Ceremony.

I sat on a mat in the fitting surrounds of the Sofitel Luang Prabang. Built as a French governor's residence in the 1900s, the property is located in a quiet residential quarter and protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Next to me is a colourful delight, a handmade marigold pyramid centrepiece known as a pha khuan.

In front of me is an elderly man known as the Mor Phon (wisher or master of ceremony, usually a knowledgeable and respected person in the community) and a number of older

women. To begin, I am handed a shotglass of Lao whisky and the prayers are said.

This was followed shortly by the tying of white string around my wrist by the older women as they murmured words of prayer to invite good wishes. This can also include quoting from Lao poetry and proverbs.

The tying of the white string represents tying of the 32 spirits to the body, putting them back in harmony as well as bringing good luck and prosperity.

With my wrist adorned with

white strings, we all gather around the pha khuan and lay our hands, palms down, on its edge as the prayer continues with "Hai kuard nnee, dee kuard kao", meaning "Bad is swept out, good is swept in".

The white strings tied around my wrists remained weeks after the ceremony because I was told to wait until they fall off as cutting the strings means the good wishes might be severed.

I was too believing to remove them and they were a warming reminder of my time in lovely Laos.

IF YOU GO ...

Fly direct to Laos from Singapore with Scoot
www.flyscoot.com

Stay at Sofitel Luang Prabang and experience the Baci Ceremony
www.sofitel-luangprabang.com

Experience the Alms Giving Ceremony with Trails of Indochina
www.trailsofindochina.com



Tying of white string brings good luck.



The giving alms ceremony dates from the 14th century.



The Laotian Baci Ceremony.