

# Easy Come, Easy Go

A moving new luxury cruise along the Mekong River opens your eyes to real life in restful Laos. By Penny Watson



From top: The Boheme drifts down the Mekong River; elephants at Laos's Elephant Conservation Centre near Xayaboury.



FROM A STILTED wooden hut perched over peaceful Nam Tien Lake, I watch as Mae Khampheng, a Lao elephant, sprays water over her four-year-old daughter Mae Champa. I'm fortunate—Laos was once known as the land of a million elephants and today there are only about 400, half of which are in captivity. But the country's **Elephant Conservation Centre** ([elephantconservationcenter.com](http://elephantconservationcenter.com)), near the village of Xayaboury, is striving for change. On this leafy 530 hectares, 18 elephants, rescued from outdated tourism and logging operations, live in tranquillity.

The elephant sanctuary is just one of the meaningful and memorable stops on my Mekong River cruise aboard the enchanting new **Boheme riverboat** ([mekongkingdoms.com](http://mekongkingdoms.com); five nights from US\$3,400 per person based on two adults sharing the deluxe suite). Launched in late 2024 by Mekong Kingdoms, *Boheme* is a charmer, a small luxury 50-metre vessel with three decks that convey the character of yesteryear while ensuring the comforts of today. My six-day, five-night itinerary follows the meandering Mekong downstream from the magical UNESCO World Heritage city of Luang Prabang to the capital of Vientiane.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF MEKONG KINGDOMS; COURTESY OF PENNY WATSON



Clockwise from far left: Making saa paper from mulberry trees and flowers, at Ban Xang Khong village; haute cuisine aboard the Boheme; in the dining room; making merit by serving rice to monks.

With 13 guest cabins (26 berths) and 20 staff, *Boheme* offers space and service as a premium. My 26-square-metre Premier View suite on the main deck has an elevated river view with floor-to-ceiling glass doors that fold open. I can either sit alfresco-style at my little dining table or relax on the cushioned window seat. I have an ensuite with a shower, and a kitchenette with mod-cons such as air-con, mini-bar and coffee machine.

On the deck below, the slightly bigger, 30-square-metre deluxe suites have similar amenities plus a wider patio with couch-sized beanbags. For honeymooners, the one-off Royal Suite, at the rear of the boat, has an extravagant bathroom with a central bathtub, shuttered windows, a king bed, and private sundeck with rhapsodic receding views over the *Boheme's* watery wake.

It's tempting to flop face-first onto those crisp white sheets but the sights and sounds of the Mekong beckon. On day one, we head upstream of Luang Prabang for a climb to Pak Ou Caves: two limestone cliff caves where 4,000 Buddha statues sit in meditative repose: some miniature, some life-size, some glittering with gold leaf, others moulded from resin or carved from stone, wood, horn and bone.

On day two, we stop at Ban Xang Khong paper-making village where Vaomanee Duangdala, founder of Luang Prabang's beautiful **Ock Pop Tok** ([ockpoptok.com](http://ockpoptok.com)) textile shop, shows us how to make saa paper from mulberry trees. That afternoon, we visit Ban Chan Neua village's **Lao Pottery House** ([laopotteryhouse.com](http://laopotteryhouse.com)). Alongside ceramics classes for tourists, the owner, Keo Lamphet, has also created a space for young, sometimes troubled, local teenagers, to practice their craft. "Some people can lie on their bed all day and do nothing, or they can come and play with clay," she says.

Back onboard, a gong summons us to *Boheme's* upper deck, where the elegant dining room features floor-to-ceiling windows that show off panoramic river views. We gather here for breakfast buffets (including my favourite *khao piak khao*, a savoury Laos rice porridge sprinkled with cilantro, fried garlic, and spring onion), and for sumptuous four- and five-course a-la-carte lunches and dinners inspired by Laotian and French cuisines.

Also on the upper deck, the open-air lounge is the spot for daily 5 p.m. cocktails. Its recliner chairs are perfect for sitting back and watching the vignettes of Laotian life play out along the river: wooden stilt



houses, striking razor-backed mountains, herb gardens that extend down to the sandy banks, and coloured longboats putt-putting around the shoreline.

On the fourth day, we go to stunner Kuang Si waterfalls to swim in the **turquoise-blue waterholes**. And then finally, on day five, the elephant sanctuary. While I'm exploring, I get talking to biologist Jamie Russell, who tells me that the centre's breeding program relies solely on foreign donations, and tourist visits. "A successful breeding program will mean the survival of Laos's elephants," he says. Another feel-good reason to journey down the Mekong. 🌏

*Getting there:* You can depart either from Vientiane (and travel upstream) or Luang Prabang (downstream). From within Southeast Asia, Bangkok Airways, Lao Airlines, Thai Airways, Thai AirAsia and Vietnam Airlines fly into Luang Prabang and Vientiane; Scoot and VietJet fly into Vientiane only.



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