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Serene Spaces

ON THE ROAD TO *wellness*

New mindful journeys that put a spin on what it means to live well

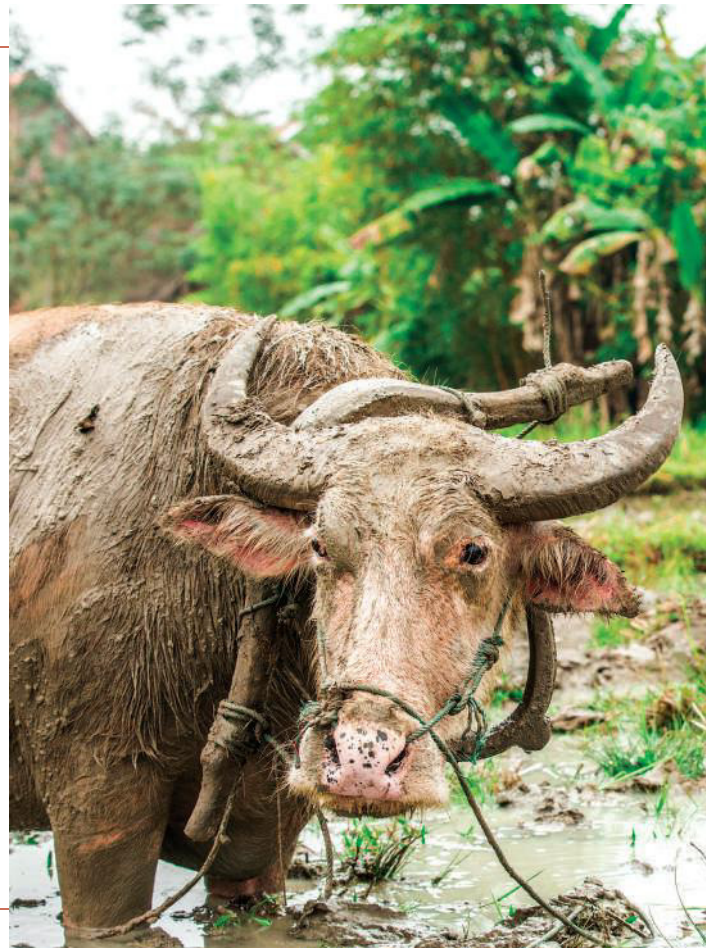
By Sandra Ramani



About 30 minutes outside of Luang Prabang, in the verdant Laotian countryside, you'll find Lautlee tending to his family farm. Spread out over almost five acres, the 34-year-old's plots grow enough organic vegetables, jasmine rice and sticky rice to support his extended family of about 40 people, many of whom also help work the land.

Things are done the traditional way here: rice seeds planted by hand, ground and sorted in ancient stone contraptions, with water buffalos providing the muscle to till the soil. About three years ago, Lautlee and his wife, Nang, began welcoming select travelers to the farm, letting them try their hand at some of these traditional farming methods—then treating them to a meal of freshly made kaopuri glutinous rice noodles mixed with farm-grown herbs and vegetables.

One of the few ways to enjoy this engaging and enlightening experience is on Abercrombie & Kent's Southeast Asia Wellness-Inspired Journey (abercrombiekent.com), part of a selection of four new mindful itineraries introduced earlier this year.



(The wellness itineraries are currently also available in India, Peru and Kenya, with Bhutan launching in 2020.) Starting with the upscale African safaris it pioneered back in 1962, the award-winning travel company has always aimed to celebrate authentic connections and one-of-a-kind experiences born of local insight and expertise—so it's no surprise that when developing wellness-focused trips, A&K looked beyond spas and yoga sessions to find ways to connect travelers with the heart and soul of a destination. These trips present a broader view of what “well-being” means—and showcase how meaningful exchanges are a big part of living well.

We enjoyed a sneak peek at the Southeast Asia Wellness-Inspired Journey, which centers on Laos and Cambodia. Here are some of the highlights:

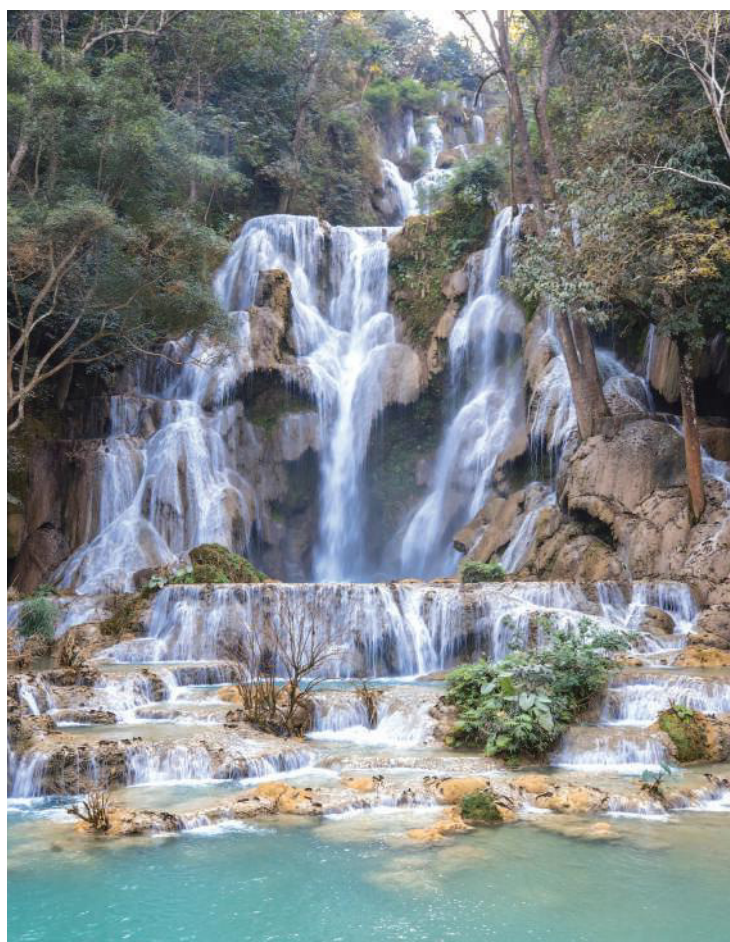
BACI AND BOCCE IN LAOS

After a one-night stop in Bangkok, where we visited a neighborhood temple and were granted blessings from the resident monks, the journey kicked off in full force in Laos, in the tranquil town of Luang Prabang. After being whisked past airport lines and fast-tracked at immigration (one big advantage of traveling with A&K is its ability to make travel hassle-free), we refueled with lunch—healthy, flavorful fare served overlooking a river at the Silk Road Café at Ock Pop Tok (ockpoptok.com), a women-founded, women-run weaving project that helps preserve and promote Laos' textile traditions.

In the late afternoon, we visited a modest local home where about a dozen neighbors were gathered to treat us to a traditional Baci ceremony, a custom typically performed to welcome guests and to send good wishes before travel or weddings. As we sat on low chairs, the residents took turns chanting and adorning our wrists with fluffy white string, then toasted us with glasses of a Laotian spirit. More drinks and laughs were had that evening, as we joined locals in games of petanque (also known as bocce), a favorite pastime with roots in Laos' French colonial history.

On our final day, in addition to the organic farm visit, we enjoyed an early-morning private meditation session at the Kuang Si Waterfalls, a forested park with trails leading to stunning mineral-rich turquoise pools. With the main three-tiered waterfall as a backdrop, Aussie expat Michelle Leuhman—the only foreigner certified by area temples to practice traditional Buddhist meditation—led us on a centering visualization journey, followed by a picnic breakfast by the falls and time to take dips in the ice-blue water before the tourist crowds arrived.

For overnights in Laos, A&K has selected the recently opened Rosewood Luang Prabang (rosewoodhotels.com), a 23-room resort located on nearly five acres just outside of town. Built on either side of a gently flowing river (topped by a mini-waterfall), the resort's buildings slope up the banks, stopping to the edge of a forest; for a lovely





walk, follow hilltop walking path through the forest to a local village. Laotian cultural influences abound at the property, from the decoration of the rooms (each is named for a notable explorer, hill tribe or artist) to the foraged-to-table cuisine overseen by French chef Sebastien Rubis, who has been designated a Chef Ambassador of the United Nations for his work in preserving Laotian culinary traditions. At the tented riverside spa, treatments have been designed with input from a traditional healer (available for consultations) and are performed using ingredients plucked from the resort's gardens.

FROM ANCIENT TO MODERN IN CAMBODIA

Next stop: Siem Reap, the charming Cambodian city, home to the UNESCO World Heritage Angkor Wat temple complex. To experience the ancient sites, we avoided the bus-tour hordes and instead rode bikes to the south gate of the 12th-century, Khmer empire-built Angkor Thom temple, then continued to peddle along remnants of stone walls to spots like the Bayon temple, with its giant carved faces, and the Terrace of the Elephants, an eight-foot-tall wall once used as a ceremonial stage. In the afternoon, insight from our expert local guide brought to life the Banteay Srei temple, nicknamed the “Citadel of Women” for its pink sandstone façade and the delicate, detailed carvings found within. We capped off the fascinating day with a Taste tuk-tuk tour through Siem Reap’s famous food scene, stopping at different hand-selected restaurants—from traditional Khmer to contemporary Cambodian—for each flavor-packed course.



Another highlight of the Siem Reap stay was a visit to one of the Cambodia Clean Water Project wells donated to area communities by Abercrombie & Kent Philanthropy (akphilanthropy.org) and the Trailblazer Foundation, with the help of many of their guests. The nonprofit has currently installed about 1,500 systems in the province, serving about 20,000 rural residents, and A&K guests are welcome to visit some of them and learn more about the need for these initiatives in this area, where only about four percent of the population has access to clean water.

In between exploring the city, there was also time to relax at our hotel, Phum Baitang (zannierhotels.com), on eight acres of gardens and rice paddies just outside the city center. Along with a pool set among the lush fields and yoga sessions on a central deck, the resort offers a lovely spa with an extensive menu of treatments that reflect healing traditions from around the world. There was more spa in our future, too, as the trip capped off with two relaxing days at Six Senses Krabey Island (sixsenses.com), a new resort set on a private island off the sandy shores of the “Cambodian Riviera.” Though more modern than the typical Six Senses resort, with each glass-walled pool villa decorated in a contemporary style, the brand’s core sustainability philosophy is at the heart of all the offerings, from the freshly sourced ingredients used in the restaurants and cooking classes (many grown in the resort’s mainland gardens) to the treatments at the hilltop spa, where guests can also mix their own scrubs and lotions using traditional Khmer herbs and spices.