

November 25, 2015 7:00 pm JST

Laos on screen

Ancient city stages film festival without a cinema

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Crowds at last year's film festival in Luang Prabang

LUANG PRABANG, Laos -- Cinema aficionados in Asia are buzzing about the Luang Prabang Film Festival, to be held Dec. 5-9 in this ancient town on the Mekong river. One of Asia's most ambitious cinematic events, it may be the world's only film festival held in a location without a single movie theater.

Regardless, Gabriel Kuperman, the festival's American director, has developed an impressive event, now in its sixth year, eschewing the overseas commercial releases that guarantee crowds. Instead, he focuses on films made in Southeast Asia, often by local filmmakers, including those from Laos itself.



Gabriel Kuperman, director of the Luang Prabang Film Festival

"We really believe in our mission, which is two-fold," Kuperman told the Nikkei Asian Review. "We promote the making of films in Laos, which is a great location. Then, we want to expose Laos to more films, so Laotians can see how things are done in neighboring countries."

"Mainly, though, we wanted to create a space for Southeast Asian filmmakers to get together, have a dialogue. The focus is really creativity and culture, and actually, Luang Prabang is a perfect place for that."

The exquisitely preserved town with its ancient temples and palaces is a serene oasis at the junction of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers. But Kuperman, who first visited while on holiday in 2008, could hardly have picked a more unlikely location for his film festival.

Although listed by Unesco as a World Heritage site, Luang Prabang has become a popular tourist destination largely because of what it lacks. Instead of modern buildings and shopping, it is a sleepy backwater abounding in steep-roofed Buddhist temples. The streets rarely have traffic, but rush hour features processions of murmuring

monks, and women weaving traditional textiles and silk.

Another feature is the lack of cinemas. At one time, Luang Prabang had two movie houses; their disappearance speaks of the impact of the Indochina war, as some people call the U.S.-led campaign in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s, the communist takeover in the region and the grinding poverty that ensued. There is also a nationwide disregard for the modernity that enralls much of Asia. An old saying holds that in Vietnam, one marvels at the busy planting of rice, in Cambodia, one watches it growing, but Laos is so languid, one can hear it. Even the country's official name -- the Lao People's Democratic Republic -- is often rendered as Lao PDR -- standing, as the joke goes, for "Please Don't Rush."

In Luang Prabang, Kuperman saw a rich culture and a proud heritage, particularly pure in this former northern capital that had miraculously escaped the devastation of the Vietnam War, when more bombs were dropped in Laos than during the whole of World War II.

Born and raised in Washington D.C., Kuperman received a masters degree in media studies from New York's New School. Far from home, and against all odds, he decided to create a festival of the highest quality in this isolated town with unpredictable electricity supplies.



Children were also amused at last year's film festival in Luang Prabang

Ethnic and traditional

"It hasn't been easy," he said. "The funny thing is people assume after all this time, it would be easy. But there are new challenges every year."

Kuperman's standards are lofty, especially for a tiny festival in such a remote location. He taps curators in each country to nominate films, a process more common to major festivals. Besides a broad program of the

region's best films, Kuperman has also dug deep into the country's cinematic archives, to show films rarely -- or sometimes never -- seen before. This year, the festival will screen films and videos of ethnic women and traditional stories.

All films are shown free at the festival. Outdoor screenings typically have 600-800 seats, Kuperman said, but regularly draw twice the attendance. More intimate showings are indoors, hosted at the 60-seat meeting room of the Sofitel Luang Prabang hotel, itself an incongruous relic. The property is a former prison and the onetime home of French colonial-era governors.

Funding comes from organizations such as the Asia Foundation, the U.S. embassy and corporate sponsors including Coca-Cola and Beer Lao. Local hotels and travel agencies have also supported the event, which is putting Luang Prabang on the maps of many potential visitors. This year there will be 30 films -- the largest program yet, screened daily from 10 a.m. until late.

In addition, there are numerous talks by visiting filmmakers, including Steve Lim, one of the top Asian Americans working in cinema. Lim worked on "Born on the Fourth of July," "Wall Street," "Pretty in Pink" and "Hill Street Blues."

There will also be special daily programs, including one on women in film, featuring a handful of prominent Southeast Asia women filmmakers. One entire day -- Dec. 7 -- will be devoted to Cambodian film. Screenings include Marc Eberle's powerful showpiece "The Cambodian Space Project -- Not Easy Rock 'n' Roll;" the gangland epic "Hanuman" by Jimmy Henderson; and "The Last Reel" which has been nominated for an Academy Award.



Kulikar Sotho's debut, "The Last Reel" has been nominated for an Academy Award.

Filmmaker Kulikar Sotho, in her directing debut, has crafted a mesmerizing story within a story in "The Last Reel," which deals with a wayward young Cambodian woman who discovers -- and completes -- an unfinished film that was being made by her mother, who she also discovers was a movie star before the Khmer Rouge launched its mid-1970s "reign of terror." "This is a contemporary story," noted Sotho. "It's very much about using the past to look at Cambodia today."

Sotho has worked on many films made in Cambodia, including Angelina Jolie's "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider." She brings an obvious hometown sensitivity to a film dealing with the traumatic past of a country embracing a new future. "I do think this is the kind of film only a Cambodian could make in this way," she said.

The fact the film has gained a starring role is part of the appeal of Luang Prabang's unique festival, showcasing Southeast Asian filmmakers screening their own art and legacy, in one of the most evocative locations in the region.