

# Northern Lights

Unesco World Heritage Site hosts Southeast Asia's premiere film festival

In the remarkably well-preserved city of Luang Prabang, the northern capital of Laos, there isn't a single working cinema (in fact, there's only one in the entire country). But during the first week of December, the streets of the city's UNESCO-sanctioned historic district are filled with cinephiles hailing from all over the region and beyond.

A total of 32 feature films will be screened at the 7th annual Luang Prabang Film Festival, which runs from December 2-7, all of them from Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam). This non-profit festival aims to boost regional awareness of independent film.

"Without exposure to films like these, moviegoers and budding filmmakers are confined to the Hollywood model for the most part," says festival director Gabriel Kuperman, a graduate of New York's New College in media studies who now works full-time for the Lao government's Department of Cinema. "We want to see more inspiration for young filmmakers as well as a more cohesive Southeast Asian film culture."



*Y/our Music*

Film experts from each of the ASEAN nations act as Motion Picture Ambassadors for the festival, recommending up to 10 feature films each. Kong Rithdee, film critic for the Bangkok Post and a filmmaker in his own right, represents Thailand, for example. Each film is screened with its original native-language soundtrack, with English subtitles added. A program of short films also appears on this year's schedule, as well as discussions and workshops.

The only prize given to filmmakers at the festival is one audience award. "We operate the festival as a celebration of film, rather than a competition," avows Kuperman.

Among the films representing Thailand this year is *Khun Pan*, a Kongkiat Komesiri-directed dramatic feature about a legendary Thai policeman who defeats and captures dozens of powerful bandit lords throughout Thailand using his skills in muay thai and Thai magic. The hit monk-themed comedy *Joking Jazz 4G* will also be at the festival, along with *Y/our Music*, an acclaimed documentary on Thai music directed by Waraluck Hiransretawat Every and David Reeve.

From Cambodia, we'll see *Diamond Island*, a drama directed by Davy Chou that follows a villager's life as a migrant worker in the capital, as well as Ian White-directed *Before the Fall*, in which three characters clash while plotting their escape during the 1975 Khmer Rouge takeover of Phnom Penh.



*A Yellow Bird*

*A Yellow Bird*, a Singaporean feature directed by K. Rajagopal, is a downbeat narrative with deliberately abrasive characters and an uncommercial authenticity, according to a *Variety* review. Meanwhile, Indonesia's principal contribution to the festival, *Question of Faith*, directed by Hanung Bramantyo, features a bold script in which Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist characters come into conflict. The trailer ends controversially with the phrase, "What is Islam?"

Three new Lao films also appear in the schedule. The trailer for *Banana Pancakes* and *The Children of Sticky Rice*, directed by Daan Veldhuizen, is beautifully shot, and promises a story in which backpackers come upon a small village in remote northern Laos in search of a traditional experience, an encounter that changes both groups (the other two films are *Love Forever* and *The River Flows*)

"When we started the festival in 2010, there were only one or two Lao feature films per year being made," says Kuperman. "Now it's up to four or five a year."



*Banana Pancakes and The Children of Sticky Rice*

Another documentary to look forward to is *City of Jade*, by Myanmar-born Taiwanese director Midi Z, which *Variety* describes as "an absorbing and highly personal essay filmed in a war-torn northern Myanmar where fortune hunters illegally mine the valuable mineral."

The nighttime venue for screenings is the handicraft market at the main intersection in town. It's entirely outdoors, with seating for over 1,500 people. During the day, events shift to the Sofitel Luang Prabang, a five-star resort housed in stately French colonial buildings, in a screening room which can seat up to 75.



*City of Jade*

The Luang Prabang Film Festival continues to grow every year, and in order to accommodate increasing interest and to include more activities, this year an extra night was added. In one of the most exciting new developments this year, visiting members of the Tribeca Film Institute will lead the 'LPPF Talent Lab: Grant Writing and Project Pitching'. In addition, each year the festival highlights the cinema of one ASEAN member nation. Last year the all-day discussion program focused on Cambodia, while this year the spotlight falls on Philippine filmmaking.

Sixteen Luang Prabang hotels are partnering with the festival with special rates and shuttle transport. For further information on accommodations and on the festival, itself, check the official website at: [www.lpfilmfest.org](http://www.lpfilmfest.org).

## Where to Stay

Accommodation options in Luang Prabang abound, but as the official partner hotel of the film fest the **Hotel Sofitel Luang Prabang** is ground zero for much of the festival activity. Which means staying in one of the 25 elegant villa suites—ranging in size from spacious to palatial—means you'll be close to all the action. This century-old colonial mansion, built in the 1900s, also features lush botanical gardens and fine dining at the Governor's Grill steakhouse restaurant.  
Tel: +856 71 260 777 | [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com)

At the **BelleRive Boutique Hotel** guests will enjoy a central location, close to everything, plus calming, magnificent views of the Mekong River. The property features three colonial houses, and offers 13 rooms in five different room categories. All rooms are furnished in an elegant mix of traditional Lao and contemporary design. The hotel also features a terrace restaurant overlooking the river.  
Tel: +856 71 260 733 | [www.thebellerive.com](http://www.thebellerive.com)