

TRAVEL

A Town Without a Cinema: Where Better for a Film Festival?

One of Southeast Asia's most ambitious film festivals operates each December in Luang Prabang, a picturesque Laotian city with ample charms but not a single working cinema

By [Ron Gluckman](#) | Nov. 29, 2012 |

One of Southeast Asia's most ambitious film festivals is staged each December in Luang Prabang, a picturesque Laotian city with ample charms but not a single working cinema. Nonetheless, the Luang Prabang Film Festival, held this year from Dec. 1 to Dec. 5, showcases a potpourri of the region's top films plus rare footage from the archives of this reclusive communist nation.

"Nothing has been that easy," concedes founder and festival director Gabriel Kuperman, 28. After earning his master's in media studies from New York City's New School, he visited this UNESCO -heritage site along the Mekong River on vacation in 2008 and instantly felt it would be his next home. He returned with a pair of suitcases, unbridled enthusiasm and no idea what the future held. "I didn't know what I would do here, but I knew I had to come back and make it work."

After studying the Lao language and immersing himself in the local culture, he came up with the idea of a film festival. Despite its lack of cinemas, Luang Prabang already attracts hordes of tourists. Yet Kuperman doesn't cater to the masses.

Now in its third year, his festival eschews established cinematic names to focus on



Courtesy Luang Prabang Film Festival - A still from *The Land Beneath the Fog*.

the region's emerging talents. "One reason we focus on Southeast Asian cinema is to help develop the Lao film industry," Kuperman notes. "By looking at films from thriving industries in neighboring countries, Lao people can more easily see that a successful industry here is actually attainable." Five Lao films are on the program this year, including the premiere of the horror flick *Chanthaly*.

Despite a shoestring annual budget of under \$50,000, the festival maintains lofty standards, utilizing volunteer film experts from Southeast Asian nations to suggest submissions. Without a cinema to hand,

screenings take place at a local hotel, in a handicraft market and at the Project Space design studio and gallery. Standout films this year include *Who Killed Chea Vichea?*, a documentary about the assassination of a Cambodian union leader and the ensuing cover-up, and *The Land Beneath the Fog*, a look at climate change in Java by Shalahuddin Siregar. Both directors will be on hand at the festival, which also offers short Lao films, exhibitions and panel discussions. Everything is free.