

Vientiane's oldest temple houses historic treasures



Vat Sisaket's historic sim (central hall) contains a large golden sitting buddha.

Ounkham Pimmata

Vat Sisaket is one of the most popular tourism sites in Vientiane, visited everyday by local and foreign tourists seeking to learn about Lao civilisation during the Lane Xang kingdom.

The temple, located at the corner of Lane Xang Avenue and Sethathirath road in Sisaket village, exists in its entirety to surprise and delight visitors from every corner of the world, housing artefacts of stone, wood, silver and gold.

As the oldest temple in Vientiane, and the only to survive the foreign raids on the capital from 1827 to 1828, Vat Sisaket is a highly important Lao heritage site. The sacred buildings are believed to be protected by spirits who chose to preserve them, as if they were destroyed, the war would be lost.

Now Sisaket temple attracts tourists searching for greater insight into Lao Buddhist design, particularly the meticulously carved stone

sculptures of the craftsmen and architects of the Lane Xang era.

Vat Sisaket is recorded as having been built during the reign of King Sayasetthathirath, taking about 10 years to finish. In 1818 it was restored by King Anouvong, the last monarch of the Vientiane based Lane Xang kingdom.

Artefacts contained within the temple buildings include a great Buddha statue, two copper Buddha images and 120 smaller Buddha statues of skilled 19th century design.

Each wall of the sim (central hall) is 55 metres in length, and the structure boasts 60 pillars and four separate entrances.

The roof is covered with stucco and there are more than 3,000 decorative indentations, each of which features two Buddha images, known as Pangmalavixay.

On each of the walls the stories of Buddha, lifestyle scenes from days gone by, and countryside landscapes are painted in minute detail.

From 1952-1969 Lao

people collected items damaged during the Indochina War to store at Vat Sisaket. These included Buddha images made of sandstone in the 11th-13th centuries, palm leaf manuscripts, candlesticks, ancient stonework and other archaeological treasures.

Outside the temple to the

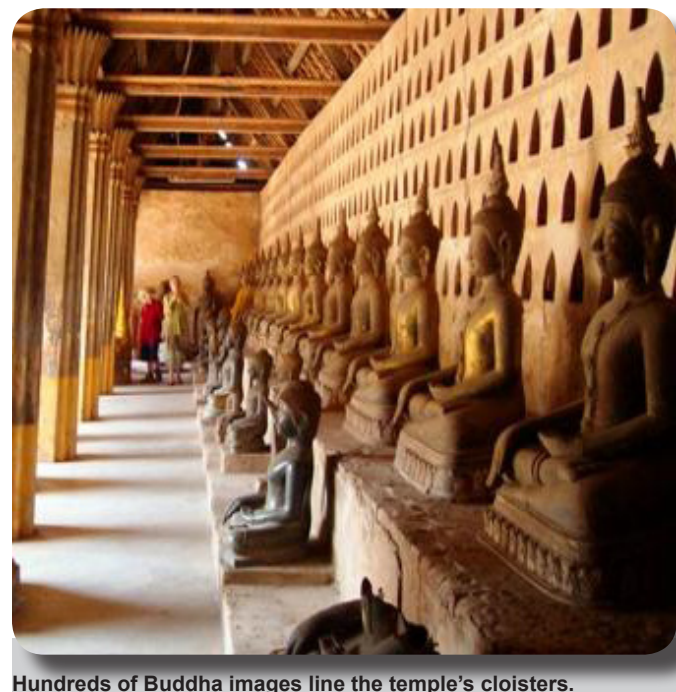
west is the former Hor Tai (library) where palm leaf manuscripts documenting Buddhist scriptures were once stored.

The small square building now contains a huge chest that once held these precious manuscripts. Although now faded, the chest was once finished in black lacquer with delicate golden designs.

Behind the library, between the cloister wall and the surrounding wall of the temple is a narrow path lined with small stupas containing relics from previous temple buildings that were burnt to the ground.

Although at first glance it may appear to be solely a museum, Vat Sisaket is still a working monastery with a number of monks and novices in residence.

The temple is a site of living history which attracts both locals and tourists. It serves an important function, helping visitors from home and abroad to learn about Lao artwork and archaeological treasures. Vat Sisaket is open Tuesday to Sunday from 8-11.30 am and 1-4.30 pm.



Hundreds of Buddha images line the temple's cloisters.