By DENISE HEYWOOD

THE 35 BUDDHIST temples of Luang Prabang are delicate structures in need of frequent renovation. Damage caused by neglect, tropical rain, humidity and heat, together with the impact of increasing numbers of tourists, all erode the buildings. This year Wat Xieng Thong, the most important and magnificent wat in Luang Prabang, and Wat Pak Khan, one of the smallest but oldest in the city, have both undergone restoration and further enhance the cultural and aesthetic value of the former royal capital of Laos.

Luang Prabang became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995. Maintaining and conserving sacred monuments is the highest priority, along with preserving the secular buildings as well, but funding is always needed. For Wat Xieng Thong, a contribution of some US$330,000 came from the United States Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation in Vientiane, the current capital, and made possible vital repairs during an eight-month project between 2012 and 2013. At Wat Pak Khan repairs and restoration were funded by The Badur Foundation and carried out by the The Buddhist Heritage Project under the auspices of the The Laos Buddhist Fellowship together with the Department of World Heritage.

Wat Xieng Thong, which dates back to 1559, needed immediate attention and the project involved the conservation of architectural surfaces of the main sim, the assembly hall, and its roof and the preservation of supporting structures within the complex. The temple, the finest example of religious architecture in Laos, had to have many roof tiles replaced, ensuring matching colours and materials, and attached using traditional techniques that had been employed when the temple was built. Damaged pieces were replaced, ensuring matching colours and materials, and attached using traditional techniques that had been employed when the temple was built. The edging of the roof is covered with golden motifs, foliage and flowers, while the inner, underneath section is deep red and covered with more gold chau sa wheels which were restored. Golden, carved eave brackets support the lowest roof which is edged with delicate golden pointed leaf-like forms.

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The temple was built by King Setthathirat, who ruled from 1548-1571. It has always served as the traditional coronation site for kings as well as the focus of several annual festivals honouring the Buddha and various folk spirits. King Setthathirat created it in memory of the legendary King Chan Chakhaphounith, whose stories are depicted in golden stencilled imagery inside the main sim. Traditionally wats were grouped around royal residences, built with royal patronage or by affluent individuals, as funding the building of a wat gains merit in Buddhism. The king employed master craftsmen and architects, specialists in ivory, wood, gold or silver, carving and stencilling, and monks themselves worked as carpenters, sculptors and painters. The upkeep of most wats, and that of the monks living within them, is entirely dependent upon donations from the community. But supporting the monastery and giving alms to the monks also brings merit to the donors. Always well maintained, Wat Xieng Thong, much admired and described in detail by French scholars during the colonial regime, survived the ravages of war and depredation and inspired UNESCO to make it – and eventually the entire city of Luang Prabang – into a World Heritage Site.

Situated at the tip of the peninsula of Luang Prabang, where the Nam Khan river flows into the Mekong, the site is, so legend relates, where a golden boundary stone was laid to demarcate the territory of the city by two hermits who were brothers. They became its tutelary spirits. Wat Xieng Thong – Xiang meaning city and Thong meaning buli tree (sometimes also described as a copper tree) was known as Temple of the Golden City and was considered a gateway to Luang Prabang. Set in a
peaceful compound, among ancient banian trees, palms, frangipani and blinding scarlet and purple bougainvillaea, this graceful, classical style, with all its shrines and chapels, radiates serenity and is especially atmospheric in the late afternoon, as the sun slopes behind the wat, when its gleaming gables and golden stencils shimmer beneath the cascading roof.

Cleaning these first was necessary, an exacting task, with careful redrawing of the images which had faded badly was carried out by master craftsmen using lacquer and paper thin wafers of gold leaf as well as gold paint. The external walls of the sim have a sumptuous jewel box appearance, a riot of ornate gold stencils of deities, mythological animals, floral motifs and lotus flowers. At the top of the outer walls, flying kinnaree, mythical part-bird part-human divinities, interspersed with small and large dharma wheels, fill almost every space in harmonious patterns. Doorways are surrounded by images of the Buddha in meditation and small flying apsaras, female celestial dancers, and divinities. In the centre, apsaras, in gold costumes and holding lotus flowers stand gracefully between the heavens, the earth and the underworld.

Surrounding the sim, the rest of the compound contains four other chapels and several stupas, as well as a drum chapel and monks’ quarters, kutis. Some of the kutis were also restored, with repairs carried out to the walls, some of which had to be replaced, and roofs, and included the installation of electricity. Restoration was done to one of the historic octagonal stupas, involving special cleaning of the glass inlays and installation of electricity. Restoration has, since its creation by Badur Foundation, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation was established in 1976 and aims to manage, develop and educate Buddhists so that its members can observe and respect the laws of the country. With branches in every province of Laos, it currently incorporates 8,796 monks, 13,376 novices, 450 nuns and 563 sangkhalit in 4,937 temples around the country. Supporting the conservation of the temples reinforces its raison d’être. As in many other Buddhist countries, education in Laos was conducted in monasteries, where monks were trained and educated for years and then taught and advised the members of the Sangha, the holy community, as well as lay people. A wat therefore has several functions. It is a site for religious worship, a community centre, a place of education and of healing, and all young Lao men spend at least a few months of their lives as novice monks in a wat.

Wat Pak Khan, dating from approximately 1773, is noteworthy because of its age and location. In particular, the attractively carved door panels and window shutters have been carefully renovated and in their pristine state are a perfect example of the gentle, understated sacred art of Luang Prabang.

The sin has a two-tiered tiled roof, independent of each other, and newly painted white walls and four windows freshly painted red on either side with simply carved wooden eave brackets in the form of naga’s. The eastern entrance has a main door with two smaller doors on either side. Of note are the two elegantly depicted images of Rama on gold on the central panels of the main doorway. Each has a serene smile and radiant expression, with a tall pointed crown and a halo and two sets of arms, revealing his divine status, with an elaborate close fitting costume, poised like a slender dancer with long legs in graceful movements and delicate hand movements, above an image of Hanuman, the monkey general, who is on bended knee, with similarly dancerly grace. They are surrounded by gilded lotus flowers and curling floral motifs in curvaceous abundance that is carefully contained within the parameters of the rectangular doors. On the window shutters the figures of divinities have hands joined in prayer carved in high relief, an unusual feature, and faces that radiate sweetness and tranquillity.

The cleaning and restoration of these doorways and windows have enhanced the carvings to show the sensitivity and refinement that artists brought to their sacred imagery. Never monumental or overwhelming, the size and proportion of Lao temples have a human scale which establishes an immediacy of contact between the pilgrim and the sacred space, creating an intimacy where the worshipper is not overawed. This creates an atmosphere of calm and acceptance that are the essential spirit of Buddhism.

Support for these two projects has been invaluable as Laos is still a cash strapped country with little industry apart from tourism. The US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation has, since its creation by the US Congress in 2001, generously provided financial aid for a total of 13 projects in Laos over the past 11 years, in addition to more than 700 cultural preservation projects in more than 100 countries, representing a contribution of nearly US$33 million towards the preservation of heritage worldwide. These have included support for The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang, a museum dedicated to ethnic minorities, in order to document the cultural practices of the Katu ethnic minority group of southern Laos and to promote pride within Katu communities of their artistic legacy. The Fund also supported conservation and restoration of artefacts at Wat Vason in Luang Prabang, which has a remarkable collection of Buddha statues, as well as funding for the preservation of fragile palm leaf manuscripts at the National Library in Vientiane.

These projects funded by the Badur Foundation and the US Ambassadors Fund nurture and enrich the city for the pride of its citizens as well as promoting it internationally. They highlight it as a place of outstanding artistic and historic interest, a centre of religious worship and a living museum of incomparable cultural heritage to be preserved for future generations.