

## DREAM WEAVERS

For generations in far northern Laos, master craftswomen have been creating exquisite textiles – often hailed as Asia’s best – that tell of a land steeped in myth. But as writer and textile obsessive **Rachna Sachasinh** discovers while on a journey from Luang Prabang, these storytellers are now finding innovative ways to adapt to a culture in transition

PHOTOGRAPHY TIM GERARD BARKER

**P**hangphon Seesuphan's round, smooth face belies her 68 years. Save for a few deep laugh lines etched into her cheeks and fanning out from the corners of brown eyes so dark they resemble glittering onyx stones, the Laotian weaver could easily pass for 50.

When I first meet Seesuphan, she's absorbed in her work but utterly content. Before her is a metal pot simmering over an open fire. White, oval silkworm cocoons float to the surface. Seesuphan taps the cocoons lightly with a slender piece of bamboo and miraculously, filaments of silk adhere to her tool like magnets. Artfully, she lifts the thread through a tiny aperture in the *kong saw lok*, a wood implement that arches gracefully across the blackened pot. With her free hand, she draws the yarn upwards towards a wide basket where it collects in gossamer clouds. I've worked with artisans in India, Mexico and Thailand and I've often witnessed the ethereal process of reeling silk by hand, but I've never seen it performed with such deep-rooted skill.

Artisans like Seesuphan are the last remaining practitioners of Laos' centuries-old tradition of silk cultivation and weaving. They're the reason I chose to move to the pretty city of Luang Prabang over a year ago from California. I soon started working at a well-regarded textile collective to learn more about how these special fabrics keep this country's culture vibrant and alive. The UNESCO heritage-listed city of Luang Prabang is the hub of a thriving textile industry that's integral to the country's social and economic welfare.



*“I’ve worked with artisans in India, Mexico and Thailand and I’ve often witnessed the ethereal process of reeling silk by hand, but I’ve never seen it performed with such deep-rooted skill”*

**GOLDEN TOUCH**  
A member of the Tai Phong ethnic group weaves bright yellow silk threads





I've always been an avid reader and fast became fascinated with the classic tales of love, courage and suffering woven into the textiles, told and retold for generations. The stories are most often related through the *sinh*, a wrap or tubular skirt that is the national dress of Lao women. In the past, the *sinh* conveyed a woman's ethnicity, her marital status and even her age. Her hopes and dreams are recounted through the motifs she selects to adorn the *sinh*. My favourite *sinhs* depict magnificent mythical creatures, spiritual emblems, flowers and animals, recounting legends like that of the famous Naga Prince who emerged from the Mekong River and fell in love with a weaver.

But I've also learned that these old stories are changing as quickly as the country is developing, and for many, the change is bittersweet. Weavers increasingly produce for the marketplace, which generates much-needed income. However, the shift from cultural to economic enterprise alters the depiction and arrangement of patterns. Motifs, which once expressed the personal aspirations of the weaver and the stories of the culture, are now susceptible to the whims of fashion.

In the course of my work and in my conversations with Lao women, I'd often heard that the best-preserved weaving traditions, in fact the best textiles in all of Laos, are those of Houaphan Province. Craggy, mist-covered mountains and narrow valleys keep this cool and temperate region's diverse ethnic communities isolated and, importantly, their stories intact. The road to Houaphan is rough and though the journey is long (almost two days of winding along perilous switchbacks and through towering mountains), I didn't hesitate when the chance arose to head here. I was determined to meet these incredible storytellers.

A close friend who travels frequently between Luang Prabang and the north had often brought back resplendent throws and scarves from Ban Tao. I was told to make it the first stop on my trip.

Tucked away in a cool valley near the Vietnam border in Houaphan's north-east, Ban Tao looks



**SILK EVOLUTION**  
 (From far left) Silk worms; cocoons; threads; weavers hard at work

*“Mist-covered mountains and narrow valleys keep this region’s diverse ethnic communities isolated and, importantly, their stories intact”*



as if it has changed very little over the centuries. Seesuphan’s traditional wooden house is raised on stilts and beyond it, fertile green rice fields and groves of mulberry trees stretch up into the hills. Occasional gusts of wind rattle the house’s woven bamboo walls. Its isolated location means the village’s inhabitants must do almost everything by hand and its cool climate is ideal for silkworm cultivation. If the story of Lao culture is contained in the country’s textiles, then Ban Tao is where the story begins.

Back in her small workspace, Seesuphan’s silk tendrils unravel from the cocoons and catch the afternoon light. “The silk from Ban Tao is the finest in Laos,” she tells me proudly. Indeed, Lao silk is renowned for its iridescence. Seesuphan recently had to stop weaving and concentrate on just reeling silk – age and a lifetime of work have swollen her joints and knuckles. Silkworm raising and reeling is certainly the domain of older women in the village: the elders have the patience and experience to work with these wriggly and temperamental critters. Younger generations of women eschew the task, opting to buy manufactured silk and rayon from nearby Vietnam, Seesuphan says. Consequently, there’s a severe shortage of Lao silk and the silk produced in Ban Tao is in very high demand. After she bundles the silk in skeins, Seesuphan sells it to weavers in nearby villages. The majority of her silk ends up in Sam Tai, the home of the country’s best weavers and textiles. It’s where I head next.

I catch a ride along a dusty dirt road that follows the spectacular Nam Sam River. Large, smooth boulders border the waterway and shallow swimming holes beckon locals and travellers alike. About 22km down river, I cross a narrow bridge and am dropped off by a large open field that anchors the town of Sam Tai. It’s late in the afternoon and a lively soccer game is under way. Around the perimeter of the field, the older folks stroll, occasionally stopping to stretch sinewy



**HEAVENLY HILLS**  
(Clockwise) Hanging the washing in Ban Saleuy; weaving bamboo; Sam Tai lookout



**FABRIC OF LIFE**  
Than with a traditional *sinh*; (below) kids splash around in the town swimming hole



**Good to know**

Houaphan Province is accessible by road and local transportation is limited. I hired **Journeys Within** to coordinate all the trip logistics. The company's portfolio of adventures includes a private tour of Vieng Xay with an ex-soldier and a textiles tour where you learn from a master weaver. A socially responsible firm that operates throughout South-East Asia, Journeys Within can organise trips to Houaphan departing from either Luang Prabang or Hanoi, Vietnam. [journeyswithin.com](http://journeyswithin.com)

**CLOSE UP traditional lao textiles**

limbs or catch up with a neighbour.

I head up a gentle incline to the home of Khamphut Thongmanee, one of Sam Tai's preeminent weavers. Thongmanee began to weave at age eight and as her skills developed, she started to design and create her own striking patterns. Thongmanee and others like her in Sam Tai are unrivalled experts at weaving complex works of art. At first glance, it appears the textiles are embroidered. But a closer look reveals that designs are woven into the textile, the result being an ornamental pattern that supplements the basic pattern of the fabric. This weaving method is called *chok* or supplemental weaving, and Sam Tai's weavers are the reigning masters of this technique. Several hundred threads are interlaced within one centimetre, resulting in a weight and feel that's similar to that achieved through high thread counts in luxury bedding.

"You can tell something is from Sam Tai by the patterns we choose," Thongmanee says. Holding up the *pha bieng* (shoulder scarf) that's on her lap, she points to the motifs. "See this? This is the double-headed *naga* (a mythical serpent) and here's the *kai* (chicken) and the *khorn* (diamond). These are always in my weaving."

As we talk, Thongmanee braids warp threads, her fingers working nimbly to tidy up the extra strands. She's finishing a textile commissioned by a dealer in Vientiane, the nation's capital, some 650km away. Among the treasure trove of textiles in her house are priceless examples of Sam Neua's best pieces. Most of these are *sinh* that took more than a month to weave. Some are woven by Thongmanee, while others are created by the women of Sam Tai and surrounding villages. Thongmanee sends the pieces to her daughter in Vientiane, who sells them to Lao and foreign buyers at the morning market or to local textile shops for upwards of US\$300 (THB10,060). Thongmanee and her fellow weavers keep as much as half of the selling price to these retailers, affording them a reasonable income and a good standard of living. That said, higher-end boutiques and hotels often mark up the products by a whopping 200-500%.

Thongmanee is tirelessly affable, calling out greetings to villagers who stroll by. All the while, she insists I eat more of the meal she has prepared. I take a small chunk of purple sticky rice from the bamboo rice basket and roll it between my fingers to make a bite-size ball. I dip this into an earthy, spicy *jeow bong*, the signature Lao relish, which

# COAST

BEACH BAR & GRILL

## SIP, SAVOUR, LOUNGE, AND LINGER

Stay all day and move your mood, exploring our range of indoor and outdoor settings, right on Samui's beach with panoramic view of the coastline. Enjoy a casual lunch in the shade, experiencing our eclectic menu of international cuisine or lounge away the afternoon on a sunken daybed in the sand, steps away from the beach.

For evenings, **COAST** transforms into one of Samui's most attractive dining experiences, showcasing grills and seafood with great beach chill music to help you relax. A variety of dining zones make it either the ideal venue for a memorable evening out with family and friends or an equally cool place to celebrate that special occasion party.

The focus at **COAST** is always on views of the beach and your effortless glide through the day.

Visit us now. Mention this ad and enjoy a complimentary **COAST** Tapas platter.

Open Hours: **12:00 - 23:00 hrs.**



**CENTARA**  
GRAND  
BEACH RESORT  
SAMUI

[www.coast-samui.com](http://www.coast-samui.com)  
E : [coast@chr.co.th](mailto:coast@chr.co.th)  
T : +66 (0) 77 230500



“Naga and siho appear  
alongside forests, houses,  
fields, caves, helicopters,  
aircraft, bombs and soldiers”



often contains dried, minced buffalo skin. It's a strange yet delicious treat.

“We're some of the last remaining weavers who still use Lao silk and natural dyes,” Thongmanee says. She leads me over to several large dye pots that occupy a corner of her courtyard. Sticks and leaves collected from nearby forests bleed rich reds, browns and yellow into the water-filled vessels. The dyes steep for days, sometimes weeks. In the case of indigo, it must ferment for over a month before it can be applied.

This time-consuming, painstaking ritual of traditional textile production is quickly losing traction among members of the younger generation, Thongmanee says. On the other hand, as authentic Lao textiles become rarer they're increasingly coveted by both Lao consumers and visitors from overseas. Houaphan's artisans are pleased that their weaving skills are a source of much-needed income to pay for schooling, healthcare and housing. This helps keep techniques and motifs of the past alive, but it also forces weavers to alter patterns to attract sales. In some cases, weavers must resort to using less labour-intensive materials, such as chemical dyes.

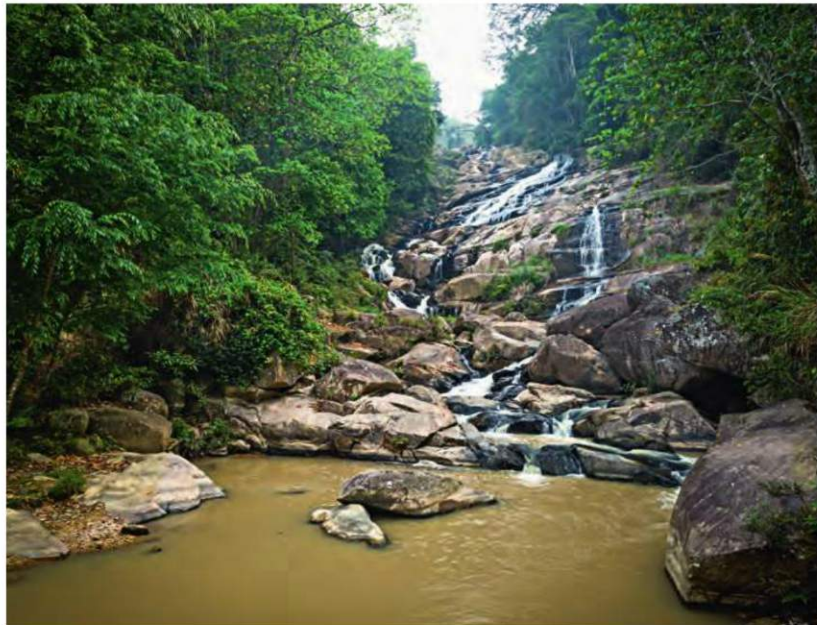
From Sam Tai, I head to Sam Neua, the capital of Houaphan Province. The road, which wasn't paved until two years ago, follows the contours of rugged, forested mountains. Early-morning fog lingers along the ridgeline. I imagine naga and *siho* (mythical half-lion, half-elephants) unfurling in the cloudy mist and it becomes clear to me how this ethereal landscape inspires the legends of Lao culture. In Sam Neua I meet Lin Thong, who's affectionately known as *mae thao*

**WEAVING TALES**  
The looms of Laos  
have spun stories  
of the country's  
culture and  
political history



**ADVENTURES**

(Clockwise from left) Vieng Xay Caves; Sabaidee Odisha restaurant; Ban Saleuy Falls



(grandma). At age 81, Mae Thao has emerged as one of Laos' most innovative and provocative weavers. Working without a pattern, she blends Lao mythology and folklore with the history of a nation that spent much of the 20th century at war.

Laos was ruled by a monarchy and occupied by the French for most of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and briefly by the Japanese during World War II. Beginning in the mid-20th century, Houaphan Province harboured the insurgent Pathet Lao, who sought refuge in the vast network of caves in the small town of Vieng Xay. The Pathet Lao fought off American aggression in the 1960s and deposed the royal government, leading the way to the formation of the modern communist Lao state. These revolutionaries made a strong impression on Mae Thao, instilling in her a deep sense of honour and pride in her country.

In her home, she shows me photos of her most iconic pieces, many of which are now in private collections. Nagas and sihos appear alongside forests, houses, fields, caves, helicopters, aircraft, bombs and soldiers. One of her earliest pieces depicts the liberation of Phou Pha Thi in 1968. In this historic battle, a secret American base was destroyed and Lao villagers reclaimed Phou Pha Thi, which in Lao means "sacred mountain/cliff inhabited by a spirit". The textiles she produces still tell stories, though they're tales of a culture coming to terms with a history of bloodshed and turmoil, one where people's lives are changing fast.

During the final days of my journey, I visit Ban Nakout, an ethnic Tai Phuan village perched on a high mountain plateau. Ban Nakout was the site of an airfield where the American military deployed aircraft that dropped bombs throughout the country. Many of the bombs didn't explode and the legacy of this unexploded ordinance (UXO) continues to haunt the Lao countryside. At the southern end of town is a small bungalow

**Beyond textiles**

**VIENG XAY CAVES**

A short drive east of Sam Neua are the **Vieng Xay Caves**, a complex of over 400 natural and man-made caves, camouflaged by spectacular limestone cliffs. The Pathet Lao staged the communist takeover of Laos from this area, ousting the royal government and defeating US forces. For nine years, the vast network of

caves provided housing, strategy rooms, schools, hospitals and living quarters that accommodated over 30,000 people. Adjacent is a man-made aqueduct, serving as both a reservoir and a swimming hole. An excellent audio tour takes visitors through the major sites and includes poignant testimony from soldiers and ordinary folks.

**BAN SALEUY**

About 20km south of Sam Neua, **Ban Saleuy** is a Tai Phong ethnic village, one of three left in Houaphan. A natural waterfall is one of the village's highlights. Go

for a 5km round-trip hike to the top to enjoy marvellous views and a refreshing drip. To warm up, head to the hot springs nearby.

**WHERE TO EAT**

Unexpectedly, the best meal I had was at an Indian restaurant in Vieng Xay. **Sabaidee Odisha** serves Indian curries and biryanis alongside typical Lao fare. Owners Prakash and Sasmita freshly prepare everything they serve, including made-to-order chapatis and authentic chai. It's located next to the market at the town's main intersection.





# Flight of the Gibbon™

It's time you met the rainforest...



ONLY ZIPLINE  
WITH WILD PRIMATES

**Voted Best**  
Attraction in Asia  
For 3rd consecutive year



## UNVEILING THE BEAUTIFUL, FRAGILE WORLD OF THE RAINFOREST


A full day experience for extreme fun lovers, getting back to nature has never been so exciting - or so secure.

CHIANG MAI / BANGKOK / PATTAYA / SIEM REAP  
Tel: Thailand +668 9970 5511 | Cambodia +855 969 999 101

**FlightOfTheGibbon.com**

housing UN teams that routinely survey the fields and forests around Ban Nakout in a bid to clear remaining UXOs. Today, lush rice fields occupy the space where aircraft once took off and landed, while leftover metal from fuel drums is used as roofing material and siding for rice-storage huts.

Wrapped in customary silk ikat sinh, the women of Ban Nakout coil their long black hair atop their heads, Medusa-like. A long silver pin tucked into their tresses signifies marriage. In Ban Nakout, I stay with Than, a 43-year-old weaver with six children, who weaves predominantly cotton sinhs that are sold in the markets of Luang Prabang. Each year, she manages to weave one or two traditional sinhs, made with silk from the silkworms she raises. “We must weave to sell [cheaper products] to earn money,” Than says. “But I always weave and wear my own [authentic] sinh. The Tai Phuan will never forget their sinhs.”

Back home, ambling through the temple-lined streets of Luang Prabang’s old town centre, I admire the sinh worn by locals with a fresh perspective. Tapestries and scarves billow in the doorways of storefronts and I recognise the arc of a narrative that’s changing with the times. I recall Than’s words and they give me hope. In the face of rapid change, women like her continue to breathe life into this time-tested storytelling tradition. 



**WORK OF ART**  
A shop owner at Vientiane’s Indigo Lab, where (below) Mae Thao’s post-war pieces are sold

หญิงชาวลาอนำเรื่องราวความรู้สึกและประสบการณ์ของตนถ่ายทอดและเก็บเป็นผืนผ้า ผ้าชิ้นหนึ่งนั้นจะเป็นผ้าที่ได้รับเกียรติบอกเล่าเรื่องราวออกมามากที่สุด ในอดีต ชิ้นนี้เป็นตัวบ่งชี้ชาติพันธุ์ สถานะการแต่งงาน และอายุ ความหวังและความฝันที่ถูกถ่ายทอดออกมาเป็นลายประดับบนผืนผ้า เมื่อประเทศพัฒนาขึ้นไป การทอผ้าเปลี่ยนรูปแบบจากวัฒนธรรมเป็นเรื่องของเศรษฐกิจ สายผ้าก็เปลี่ยนไปเป็นเรื่องราวของแฟชั่นและเทรนด์ แฟชั่นหัวพัน ร้อยเป็นแหล่งอนุรักษ์การทอผ้าที่ดีที่สุด

ณ หมู่บ้านเต่า พังพอนอาศัยอยู่ในบ้านไม้ยกสูง ด้านนอกเป็นทุ่งนาและไร่จันทน์ แถบนี้อยู่ค่อนข้างห่างไกล ครั้งนั้นคนในหมู่บ้านจึงใช้แรงงานฝีมือเป็นหลักในการผลิตไหม ซึ่งชิ้นนี้เป็นแหล่งไหมที่ดีที่สุดของประเทศลาว ไหมเหล่านี้ถูกส่งต่อไปยังหมู่บ้านอื่นได้ แหล่งที่ขึ้นชื่อว่าทอผ้าได้ดีที่สุด ที่หมู่บ้านซังใต้ ฉันได้พบกับคนทอผ้าที่เก่งที่สุดในหมู่บ้าน คุณค่าสุดของผืนผ้าที่ทอด้วยอายุ 8 ปี มีความเชี่ยวชาญในการออกแบบ สร้างแพทเทิร์น ที่ลึกลับซับซ้อนเชิงศิลป์ได้อย่างดีเยี่ยม เราสามารถบอกได้ว่าผ้าผืนนี้มาจากซังใต้ โดยการดูลวดลาย ปรากฏมาศหัวคู่ ไก่ และเพชร บนผืนผ้า ผ้าชิ้นส่วนใหญ่ใช้เวลาทอกว่าหนึ่งเดือน และสามารถนำไปขายที่เวียงจันทน์ได้ถึงเงินละ 300 ดอลลาร์สหรัฐ ที่เมืองเป็นแหล่งค้าขาย ที่ยังนิยมไหมแบบธรรมชาติ ซึ่งใช้เวลาเป็นอาทิตย์ หรือบางทีเป็นเดือนในการย้อมการย้อมคราม

ฉันเดินทางมาต่อที่ซังเหนือ เมืองหลักของ แขวงหัวพัน เต๋อไปเจอแม่เผ่าลิน ทอง วัย 81 ปี นักทอผ้าผู้สร้างสรรค์ที่สุดคนหนึ่งของลาว แม่เผ่าลินสามประสบการณ์ที่ผ่านยุคสมัย ครอบครองทั้งฝรั่งเศส ญี่ปุ่น อเมริกา จนถึงสมัยปฏิวัติประเทศลาวเข้าไปในผลงาน ผูกกับวิถีความเชื่อโบราณ เธอใช้รูปภาพผ้าลายผาดและคริสต์ ที่ขายลือมาที่บ้าน บ้านคนทุ่งนา เสิร์คอปเตอร์ เครื่องบิน ทหาร ฯลฯ แสดงถึงวัฒนธรรมที่กำลังเปลี่ยนผ่าน

วันท้ายๆของการเดินทางเราไปเยี่ยมบ้านนาฏ ของชาวไทพวนบนยอดเขา แถบนี้เป็นจุดที่ทหารอเมริกันใช้เป็นจุดขึ้นลงของเครื่องบินที่จะเปิดส่งสงคราม และได้ทิ้งระเบิดและสรรพาวุธที่ยังไม่ระเบิดไว้มากมาย ทำให้ชาวบ้านหวาดกลัว แต่ยังมีชีวิตชีวาจากองค์การสหประชาชาติมาคอยจัดการเสาะหาและกำจัดให้อยู่เป็นประจำ

ตาล หญิงในหมู่บ้านนาฏเล่าว่า จะทอชิ้นผ้าฝ้ายเพื่อรองรับตลาด ที่เชียงทอง และหลวงพระบาง แต่ทุกปีก็จะทอผ้าชิ้นจากไหมที่ปลูกเองไว้ใช้ และเมื่อฉันกลับมายังหลวงพระบาง ฉันรู้สึกชื่นชมผู้หญิงผู้ขึ้นใจในมุมมองใหม่ และมีความหวังว่า ยังมีผู้หญิงที่ยังสืบทอดวัฒนธรรมชิ้นต่อไป

Check out our destination guide on page 116 and book your flights at bangkokair.com



# QUEEN SIRIKIT INSTITUTE

Arts of the Kingdom Museum Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall



## THE KINGDOM'S MASTERPIECES

ARTS OF THE KINGDOM MUSEUM exhibits masterpieces from the Queen Sirikit Institute.

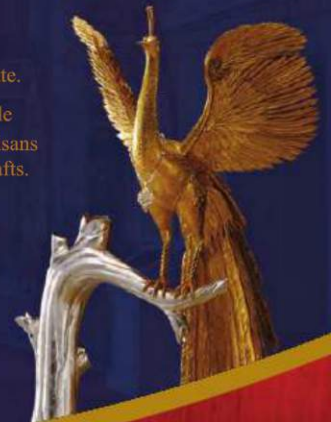
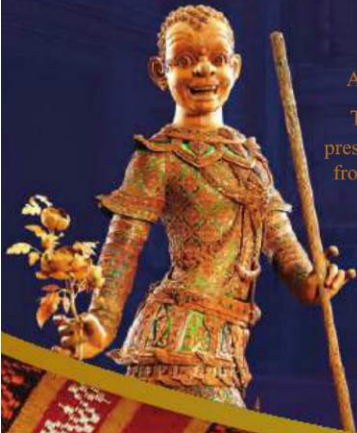
The primary aim is to help provide supplementary income for underprivileged families while preserving the Kingdom's arts and crafts. The masterpieces showcased are testament to the artisans from the Queen Sirikit Institute, who undergo rigorous training in various fields of arts and crafts. The museum is located in the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall at Dusit Palace.

Open Tue-Sun from 10am-5pm (last admission at 4:30 pm)

Kindly dress appropriately – shorts and sleeveless tops are prohibited, and women are advised to wear a long skirt or Thai-style sarong.

Tel: +66 2 283 9411, +66 2 283 9185 For GPS : 13.771507, 100.513681

For more information, visit [artsofthekingdom.com](http://artsofthekingdom.com)



## QUEEN SIRIKIT MUSEUM OF TEXTILES

Admire the intricate pieces of textiles produced by members of the Support Foundation under Her Majesty the Queen's Royal Patronage at the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles. Home to a trove of priceless pieces of work, the museum also boasts a display of the first national costumes created by Her Majesty and 30 exquisite dresses from Her Majesty's personal collection. The museum houses four galleries, each one taking visitors through a brief history of Thai textiles through exhibits, photographs, film and multimedia presentations.

Ratsadakorn-bhibhathana Building, The Grand Palace, Phra Nakhon, Bangkok 10200

Open daily from 9am - 4.30pm (last admission at 3.30pm)

Telephone: +66 2 225 9420, +66 2 225 9230

For more information, visit [queensirikitmuseumoftextiles.org](http://queensirikitmuseumoftextiles.org)

