



Azerai Rises

Hotel legend Adrian Zecha talks about his bold new property in Luang Prabang.

BY RACHNA SACHASINH



FROM TOP: Cycle up to the entrance of the Azerai in Luang Prabang; the hotel's founder, Adrian Zecha.

A MYSTERY WAS AFOOT on the site of Luang Prabang's old Phousi Hotel. What was being built behind the tin-sheet barricade, inching upwards day by day, shrouded by dust and demolition?

I was living in Luang Prabang, and the rumor mill was churning with gossip about the construction site. Word on the street was that the project belonged to Adrian Zecha, the hotelier who set a new standard for luxury travel when he launched the Aman brand back in 1988. Aman was a pioneer in making the hotel experience feel less like paying to stay in a nice room and more like being welcomed by a gracious host to a holiday in their elegant home. Zecha's resorts were Zen-like cloisters marked

by their remote, virgin locales; their expansive, understated villas; and hyper exclusivity. The hotel going up here was smack in the middle of town and hemmed in on either side by a noisy school, a temple and a busy road—nothing like the world was accustomed to seeing from Zecha.

And so the intrigue grew, all the more titillating for its hidden-in-plain-sight appeal, right on the threshold of the UNESCO heritage town's core protected zone. Wat Mai, the resting place of the Phabang, the town's namesake Buddha image, is a three-minute stroll, and the broad, silty Mekong is less than 100 meters away—you can sprint there and barely break a sweat.

Yet for all the speculation, when the property welcomed its first guest last December, it did so without fuss or fanfare. No press release, no grand opening, no website, no social media posts. No phone number, no reservation desk. Up until the very last minute, it didn't even have name. Azerai was indeed an enigma, and one I set out to solve by going directly to the source: Adrian Zecha himself, a man surrounded by even more mystery than the nearly nameless hotel he just opened.

ZECHA IS 84 YEARS OLD, charming and chatty. Impeccably self-possessed, with an easygoing mien, he entertains me with colorful stories about journalism, deal-making, hotels and the Azerai.

"I am happy here. I love it," he says when I speak to him one balmy afternoon on the hotel's outdoor terrace, surrounded by a >>

stand of Indian cork trees exploding with white blooms. The 53-room Azerai is an intimate community of five heritage-style buildings whose whitewashed facade and sweeping, temple-inspired roofline pay homage to the town's pleasant mix of traditional teak houses, French colonial bungalows and Buddhist temple architecture. Each space suggests contemporary studio living with modest 35-square-meter standard rooms and a total of four 85-square-meter suites. Lacey tropical palms fringe the property, while the interior courtyard is anchored by a glorious 100-year-old ficus, which shades a sprawling 25-meter pool—the only one permitted on the historic peninsula.

In spite of the small footprint, the dwellings feel spacious, with each room accommodating a handmade king-sized bed, two vanities, a desk, a wardrobe and seating area. The handsome blond wooden beams, furniture and flooring are hewn from indigenous sai champa trees, a fast-growing species that is a sustainable alternative to teak. French louvered doors lead to verandas outfitted with smart loungers and wide daybeds. Some verandas offer discreet glimpses of next door Wat Hua Xiang's monastic rituals and its balustrades with colorfully tiled *nagas*, or serpents. Others frame the interior courtyard, with fleeting peeks into the goings-on about town.

The property is all understated elegance and cosmopolitan sensibility. Classic Zecha, you might say. However, priced at a modest US\$250 per night, Azerai is billed as “affordable luxury.” If Azerai feels perfect coming from this hotelier, it also is something entirely different. It represents a new chapter for Zecha, after turning the page on his fallout with Aman.

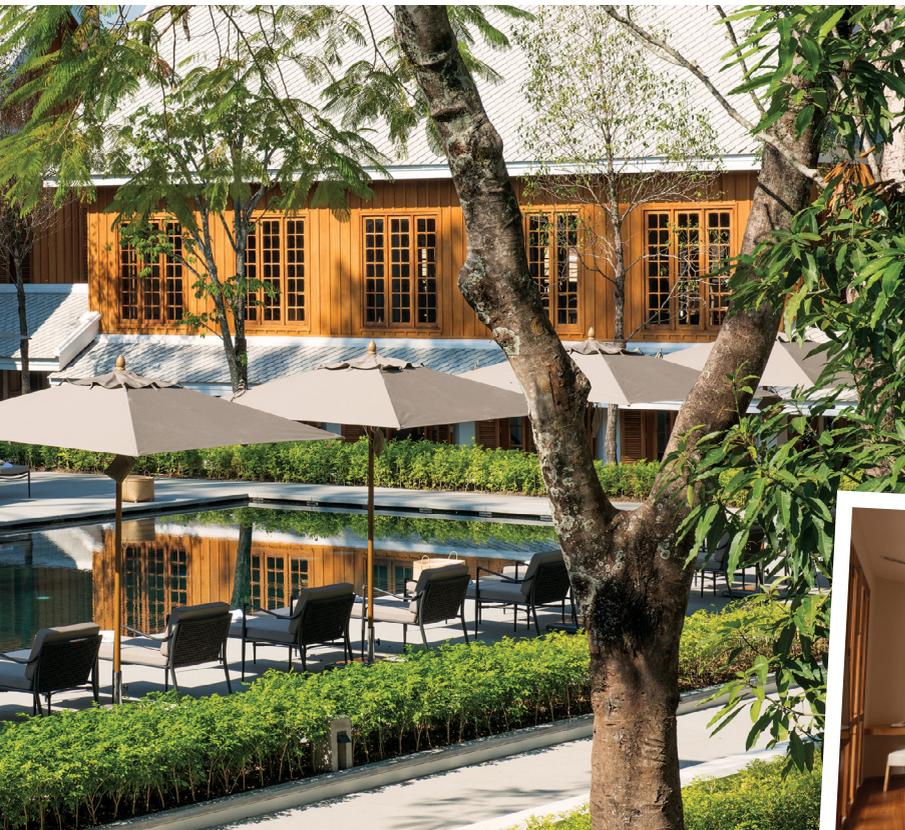
LIKE ANY COMPELLING CHARACTER, Zecha is no stranger to controversy. For the past few years he's been mired in a legal mud fight, trying to broker peace between Aman's new owners and to salvage the brand's original concept. In 2007, Zecha sold the majority shares to an Indian real estate company, agreeing to stay on as CEO for 10 years, but in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Zecha found his company bouncing between owners, and eventually in the hands of Vladislav Doronin, founder of Moscow-based Capital Group, whose expansion plan for Aman was a stark departure from Zecha's vision.

When Zecha was unceremoniously dismissed from company, he didn't stop or disappear. He simply moved on. He had redefined luxury once, so he decided to set about doing it again. Azerai represents the latest incarnation of what he sees as a winning idea for resorts.

But the concept for the Azerai first came up 15 years ago, when Zecha launched the Serai >>



FROM LEFT: Azerai is a short stroll from Wat Mai; the handsome blond-wood staircase.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Azerai is the only hotel on the historic peninsula that got permission to build a swimming pool; a flower-petal chandelier; inside a suite.



resort in Bali, built on land he borrowed from longtime friend Franky Tjahyadikarta, owner of Alila Hotels. The idea was to “scale back the hardware, but keep the software,” Zecha says, by downsizing the hotel, but keeping the service elements, or “software,” the same. “It was a big success. I had friends who would sneak off to the Serai instead of staying at Amankila,” he says. Eventually, Zecha sold the Serai to Tjahyadikarta, who currently runs it as the Alila Manggis. “At the time, I was too busy with Aman, and Franky wanted his land back,” Zecha says. Yet the allure of an “affordable luxury” brand stuck with him and, post-Aman, seemed like as good a time as any to test those waters.

ZECHA DOESN'T SEE THE AZERAI as “Aman-lite,” but as the result of finally being able to realize the Serai’s full potential. Like many of his past endeavours, success is pinned entirely on his sensibility. This isn’t simply about how to reduce the bottom line and increase profits; it is about extending his concept of luxury to a wider audience.

The Luang Prabang location is just the beginning for the Azerai brand. There is another Azerai property underway in the

canal-filled city of Can Tho, four hours south of Saigon, set to open at the end of this year, and rumor has it that Shanghai and Havana are in the mix.

It is a lofty endeavour for an 84-year-old to roll out a new industry-shifting hotel brand. He’s had such a successful career, though peppered with heartache along the way, so I ask him: why not just retire, sit back and enjoy one of his vacation houses for more than a few days each year? He laughs. “I love doing this. Why stop?”

I leave Zecha in the company of a group of Japanese businessmen—Amanjunkies no doubt—who, along with other guests, have been rubbernecking our tête-à-tête all afternoon. Climbing a stairwell cut from luscious straw-colored timber, I settle into a seat on a veranda off the restaurant’s urbane cocktail lounge.

Azerai fully exploits the charms of the veranda, the iconic Indochinese perch which elicits long, languid periods of unabashed daydreaming and reflection, preferably with cocktail in hand. From this vantage, under the low slung wooden eaves, I watch the setting sun streak the sky pink and purple. Motorists circle the intersection making up traffic laws as they go. Soon, streets lamps and fairy lights blink on, and the night market, full of artful ethnic handicrafts and toothsome food stalls, gets underway. A knot of locals and tourists amble past, and it seems like the Azerai has been here all along. 🍷

azerai.com; doubles from US\$250.