

Chapter 2

Overview of Wat Phou Champasak

Wat Phou Champasak is the oldest archaeological structure in Lao PDR, and can be found in Champasak Province in the southern part of the country. One can reach Champasak in a number of ways, such as by air from the capital city of Vientiane, or direct from Thailand, flying into Pakse District - the capital district of the Province. One can also reach the area by land from Oubon Ratchathani Province in Thailand, passing through the international border at Wang Tao-Chong Mek to Pakse District, thereafter travelling south from Pakse on road 13 for about 35 kilometers, finally arriving in Champasak District, which is the location of the ancient city and of Wat Phou temple complex. Travelling from Cambodia to Champasak, one passes through the border at Vernkharm, or from Vietnam one can also pass through the Lao Bao border crossing into Savannakhet Province, then travelling on to Champasak. Accommodations and other services can be accessed in Pakse or in Champasak District, where the facilities are guaranteed to be comfortable.

Many people know the name Champasak because it is a natural and cultural area; however, fewer people know the history of the area. Champasak District has the same name as the Province, and there are many ancient structures left in the area, such as rock palaces, sanctuaries and statues, as well as ancient cities and temples. Most people in the area have chosen to settle on the plains, as these are suitable for planting crops; the streams in the area are as moist as the ocean, located as they are within an area of nine mountains, which provide the backdrop to this historical district. In accordance with its Khmer history, the old name for Champasak was *siam phou poura* or *samphoupoura*, and its oldest indigenous inhabitants were Austronesians, such as the Cham and Khmer.

Lao and Foreign researchers state that Hinduism began to influence this area in the third century, and that Wat Phou Champasak temple complex was constructed between the end of the fifth century and up to the twelfth century AD, making the architecture pre-Angkorian and Angkorian.

The architectural construction reflects the influence of Hinduism, which was worshipped by the ancient Khmer, and is located around Phou Kao Mountain. On top of the mountain there is a big rock which looks like a hair-bun done in the style of a Lao woman, or *shivalinga*, who the Hindu people worshiped. *Shivalinga* was the highest god of them all, or in Sanskrit *Lingaparavata*, which means the Linga Mountain of the god Shiva. Many people could not climb up to worship at this point - it is 1400 meters above sea level, so as a result the ancient Khmers constructed rock palaces at the foot of the mountain, to act as worshipping and religious activity locations, which are collectively referred to as Wat Phou Champasak today (Khankham, 2003).

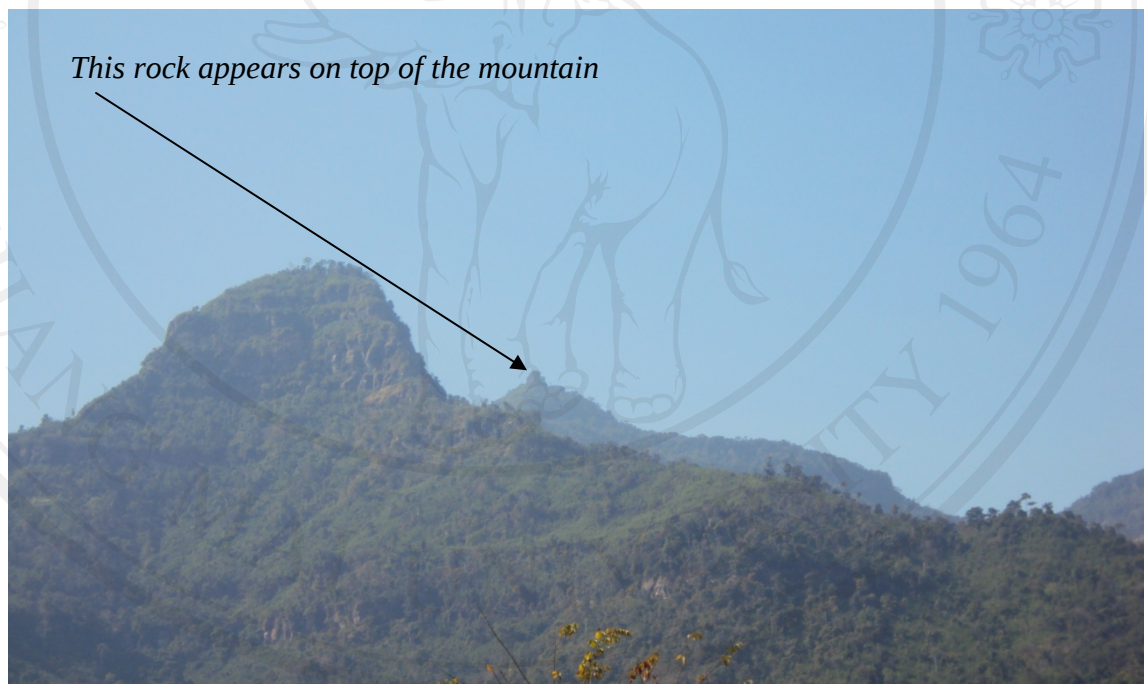


Figure 2.1: The Top of the Mountain looks like the Bun of a Woman's Hair

Source: Author; photo taken during field data collection, December 2011

2.1 The World Heritage Site of Wat Phou Champasak - as a Tourist Destination

The government of Lao PDR is judged to increase the prosperity of its people through the growth of the economy, and this judgment has been proceeded through an economic policy framework introduced in 1990s at the national level, and since that

time, the provincial level is also developed through the development plans as well. The Champasak area, at the same time, is clearly considerable within this policy, due to its agricultural potential and its location as the central point for communications between southern Laos and neighboring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. As far as, Improvements being made to the road network will also increase this potential and also open up the area to tourism – to a greater degree (Lao PDR, 2000: 58).

Tourism is one of the major growth areas of the economy for Lao citizen, and is likely to become an even more important in the southern part of the country, particularly at the world heritage site of Champasak Province, which is potentially one of the most exciting cultural sites in the Laos. On the one hand, Government policy has focused on the sustainable development of cultural tourism, and for this it is essential that the integrity and character of the historic of the landscape surrounding this site is preserved, as this is a key attraction for high spending of people being from developed countries such as: Europeans, Americans, Australians as well as Japanese, those whom the government is trying to attract (Phakhanxay, 1999: 222).

Wat Phou Champasak is an architecturally rich and well-known ancient monument in the southern part of Lao PDR, which consists of outstanding structures artistically and other valuable objects that the ancient Khmer people used in the construction of the monument. All these valuable items refers to the ancient people's cleverness and abilities, and the charming and interesting handmade sculptures and the artistic items have become a symbol of the national culture step by step (Lao PDR, 2000: 100).

Surrounding Wat Phou Champasak, there is a large heritage and cultural landscape, which covers the site of Wat Phou also. Wat Phou is only a part of this site, known collectively as Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone. The site is a well preserved archaeological cultural landscape, which around two centuries AD (the fifth or sixth), it was planned and developed by the occupiers of Khmer people, as the material representation of their symbolic universe, and it is spread over an area of over 300 square kilometers; nearly 400 square kilometers. The site is focused on the natural features of a mountain and a river (Phou Kao Mountain and the Mekong River), in addition to containing numerous man-made monuments.

And this site also includes one of the earliest known urban settlements in Southeast Asia along the bank of the Mekong River (Lao PDR, 2000: 12).

Cultural and natural world heritage sites throughout the world are very important for the human resources located nearby, and some of the world heritage sites, which represent the cultural and natural features of a country, as well as the world, are very valuable and important for present-day populations, as they will be for future generations as well. Countries' heritage sites become World Heritage sites only after they have been surveyed and judged based on the criteria set by UNESCO.

The following provides details of UNESCO's evaluation of the outstanding universal significance of cultural site and tourism attractions around the monument management zone of Wat Phou Champasak:

1. In terms of representing the human genius required to produce a masterwork, Wat Phou temple complex meets this goal through its integration of a symbolic plan with the natural landscape, and through the very high quality of its work artistically.

2. An important exchange of human values is exhibited, over a period of time and within this cultural part of the world. However, it also includes other and various developments such as architecture and technology, monumental art, town planning or landscape design. The Champasak plain landscape shows the methods of the ancient Khmer people planned, engineered and utilized the landscape according to their beliefs, and also to provide the agriculture surplus necessary to support the urban population, religious institutions and royal elites. This archaeological evidence shows the extent and intensity to which this landscape was planned and used.

3. Bearing a unique or at least an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or civilization which has mostly disappeared – this symbol of culture represents the civilization of the Khmer ancient people, this dominated much of Southeast Asia for many hundreds of years - at least 800 years. The Champasak area is the only the place in which it is possible to gain an overall view of all aspects of the culture mentioned, as it shows throughout this period of time the social and economic life of the common people, as well as the ritual religious and political aspects of the culture.

4. Being an outstanding example of a type of building or architectural or technological group or landscape which help explain stages of human history, the area

still contains many remains, not just the buildings of the Khmer civilization at Wat Phou that are great artistically, but also in terms of the organization of the whole landscape and the urban planning used, which cannot be seen elsewhere.

5. Being directly or tangibly associated with many aspects which belong to living traditions, ideas, or beliefs - with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance, Hinduism is great and is also very old belief systems in the world, which can influence all aspects of the life of Hindustan such as: socio-economic and political capital. The area of Champasak provides evidence of how one of the great Hindu-influenced cultures of the region changed its homeland and engineered its landscape to conform to the view of the universe, as prescribed by its belief system. (Phakhanxay, 1999: 84-88).

This study, I conducted the research into the consumption of tourism at the World Heritage site of Wat Phou Champasak temple complex, finding that the main features of the site are attractive to visitors, leading to it becoming a key tourist destination, one known around the world, having also been registered as a UNESCO site.

The monument management zone of Wat Phou Chamapasak consists of many features to attract visitors. With many outstanding features, Wat Phou Champasak is an historical and archaeological architecture site, integrated with natural views of the surrounding area. The development process around Wat Phou Champasak has not changed its style, in fact it has been preserved in order to retain the old style; the structures, as ruins, have been retained in the old style in order to allow visitors to recall events that happened in the past.

In addition to becoming a tourist destination, Wat Phou Chamapasak has also integrated with the lifestyles of the people living in the villages around the area, because it has retained a traditional style. The lifestyles of the locals represent the culture and traditions of their Lao origins, which are different from the visitors' backgrounds, as they are mostly from developed countries. As a result, the site is able to attract visitors, not only due to the management zone around Wat Phou Champasak itself, but also because of the local lifestyles seen in the villages around the site. However, with the influx of tourists into the area, local people have developed facilities to suit the visitors as well; building accommodation for them (guest houses

and hotels), cooking local as well as western food, selling local products such as handicrafts, and maintaining Lao culture and traditions in order to let the visitors see and find out more about the local style. These features have been integrated with the outstanding structures to be found at Wat Phou Champasak, which are attractive to visitors and have become a key tourist destination.



Figure 2.2: Mr. Oudomsy Keosacksith, Vice-Director of the Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department

(Source: Author - photo taken during field data collection, December 2011)

The following text comes from an interview I held with Mr. Oudomsy Keosacksith, Vice-Director of the Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department, during my field work visit to Wat Phou Champasak in December 2011:

At our tourist destination, the World Heritage site of Wat Phou Champasak, visitors come here firstly because the name of Wat Phou Champasak is famous; they come to see the place and find out about its history and archaeological architecture. However, when they come, they do not just visit Wat Phou; before arriving at Wat Phou they have to pass local villages, so they also see the lifestyles of the local people. After visiting the outstanding sites at

Wat Phou, tourists also visit the surrounding villages and are able to see the differences between their own lifestyles and those of the local people. This is a factor which attracts the visitors, because the lifestyles here are different from their own. Most of the visitors are from the developed countries; their lifestyles are modern and they stay in tall buildings with air conditioning, use a clean water supply and have a meal on the table, but it is rare to find these elements locally. As a result, the World Heritage site of Wat Phou Champasak has become a key tourist destination for visitors, not just for the name and structures of Wat Phou Champasak itself, but also due to the lifestyles of the local people.

(Oudomsy, December 2011)

The World Heritage site of Wat Phou Champasak is in Champasak District; however, the area is classified in its entirety as the World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone, which itself is divided into four zones. The other three zones are the sacred environmental protection zone - which covers 92 square kilometers, the 21 square kilometer archaeological research zone and the 85 square kilometer monument management zone.

2.2 Location of Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone

The Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone is located in Champasak District, though a small part of its northwestern area lies in Phonhong District, and one temple complex is located at Tomo, on the eastern banks of the Mekong River, in Pathumphone District. The whole area covers 390 square kilometers. The western edge of the area is dominated by a mountain chain running north from Phou Kao Mountain. To the east of this site is the river flood plain, where the bulk of the archaeological sites are to be found, and bounded on its eastern edge by the Mekong River. The other great natural feature of the landscape is toward the base of the mountain, where the plain rises and is dissected by numerous water sources running off the mountain and into the Mekong River through small but steep

sided valleys. Most of the site lies within Champasak District and all the districts covered are located within Champasak Province (Phakhanxay, 1999: 44)

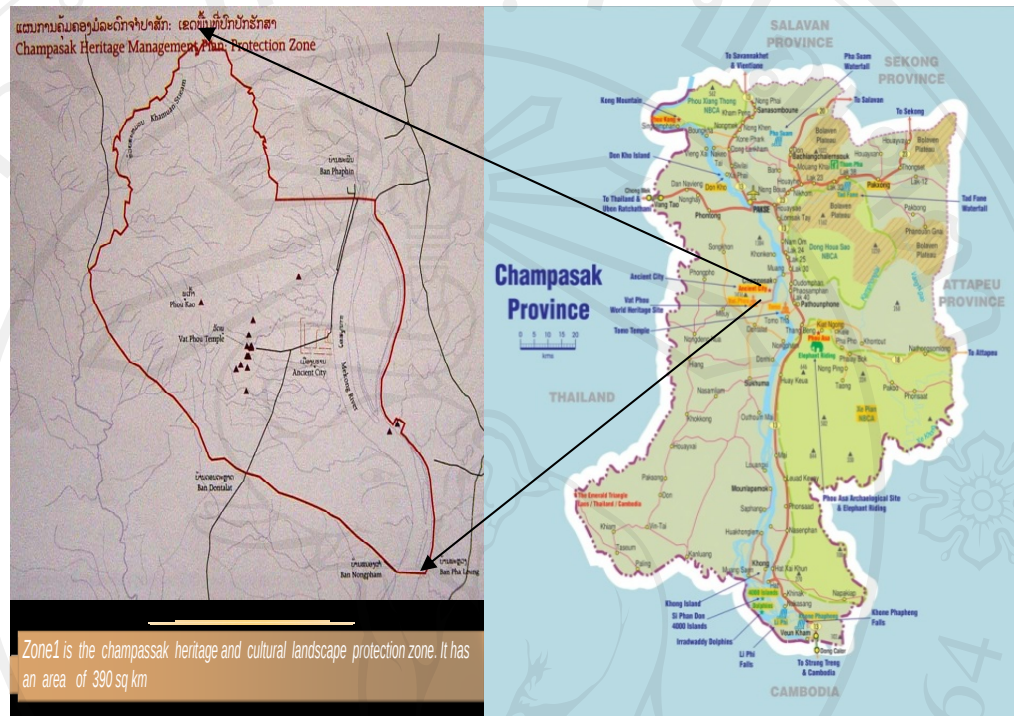


Figure 2.3: Map of Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone

Source: Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department (field data collection, December 2011)

- Legend:**
- Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone
 - ▲ Standing Monument
 - Rivers and streams
 - Roads

2.3 Location of Wat Phou Champasak

Champasak District is located in the South-West of Lao PDR, about 500 kilometers from the capital city of Vientiane, and situated on the western bank of the Mekong River. The district has long been noted for the existence of the Wat Phou Temple complex, an important example of both early and classical Khmer

architecture dating from the seventh to the twelfth centuries AD. The religious complex of Wat Phou is of Khmer architecture but reflects the Hindu religion and is situated at the foot of a hill. The temple complex is the focal point of a complex cultural landscape centered on the Champasak plain and taking in Phou Kao Mountain to the west and the banks of the Mekong River to the east. It is about three kilometers to the west of the Mekong's riverbank. The Wat Phou Champasak temple complex is also referred to as a monument management zone within the Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone, which covers 2.85 square kilometers (Phakhanxay, 1999:40).

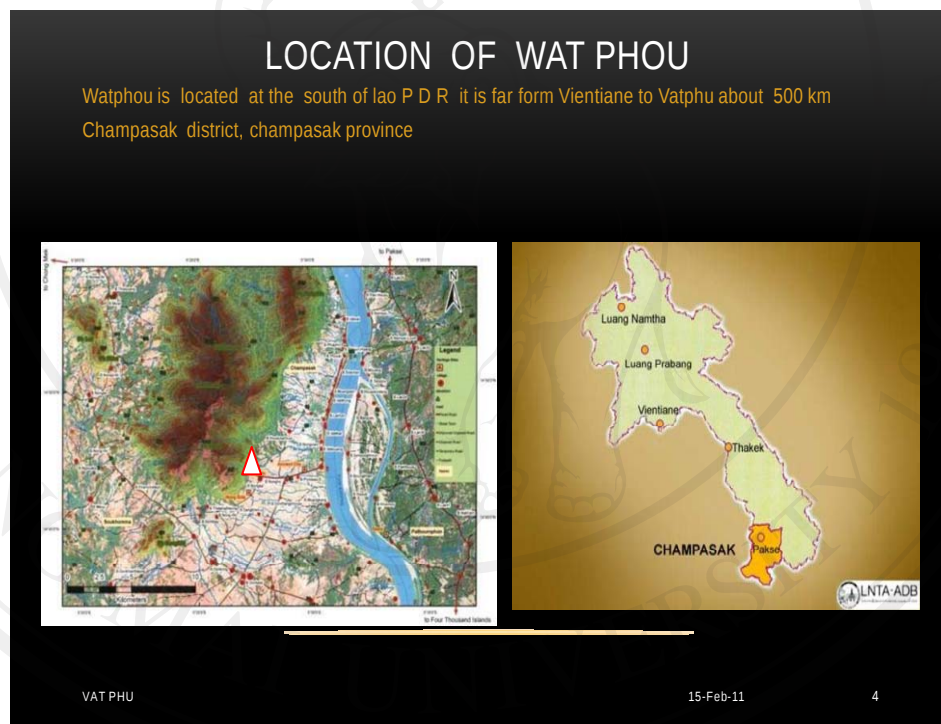


Figure 2.4: Map of the Location of Wat Phou Champasak

Source: Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Site Department (field data collection, December 2011)

Legend: △ Wat Phou Temple Complex
— Mekong River
□ The Mountain
— Roads

When visiting Wat Phou Champasak, then before arriving at the site, the surrounding community consists of many villages scattered along the road, starting from the port to the north of the District and running to the south for about thirteen kilometers. The villages near the site are surrounded on three sides by the banks of the Mekong River, the road to Wat Phou and rice-fields respectively. The District is bounded by the Champassak mountain range, within which sits Wat Phu sacred mountain. The area contains over ten villages.

2.4 Wat Phou Champasak in the Contemporary Period: 1988 to 2011

Wat Phou Chamapasak is an archaeological site; though many of the original structures at Wat Phou have disappeared and been replaced by new ones, though even these were built a long time ago and are now in ruins. Wat Phou Champasak has a long history and is located on the slopes of a hill, and represents one of the most outstanding examples of archaeological architecture from the Khmer ancient period, attracting a new wave of tourists every generation. As a result, the government of Lao PDR has recognized the importance of Wat Phou Champasak and now funds a local office to manage it, plus has sought technical and financial support from UNESCO over a number of years.

One day into the fieldwork, in December 2011, I interviewed Mr. Bounlab Keopanya, Vice-Director at the Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department.

He has revealed to me that, in order to protect this archaeological site, it has been necessary to restore the structures that lay in ruins; however, many governments and projects have helped restore the surviving structures at Wat Phou over a number of years. During the period 1988 to 1990, a UNDP project was the first to help restore the surviving structures at Wat Phou, working with the world heritage management group and providing the appropriate human resources by focusing on providing staff to work in the museum office, plus the UNDP provided staff to attend training sessions in India. This project worked at Wat Phou project for two years, then after that, in 1997 and 1998, co-operational projects were set up with the support of the governments of Italy and Japan, worked at Wat Phou for two years and supporting its World Heritage status. The third project helping to develop the Wat Phou area was a Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) led project which ran between

2001 and 2002, the first task of which was to build a museum to exhibit archaeological objects, after which it helped drain the mountain. The following year, the Italian government helped restore the *nantin* cow building (2005 to 2006). At present, there are three projects working at Wat Phou monument, the first of which is an Italian project to keep restoring the *nontin* cow building, which will last until 2014. There is also an Indian project, lasting six years, which is focused on restoring the northern palace, and there is a French project lasting three years which is helping to restore the doors of the surviving buildings.

2.5 World Heritage Site Access at Wat Phou Champasak

Lao PDR has two world heritage sites, the first of which is Luang Prabang World Heritage Town and the another, Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone, which was declared the second world heritage site in Lao PDR in 2001, by UNESCO. The ancient monument complex at Wat Phou Champasak is part of the Zone, and the ancient monument complex at Wat Phou Champasak was declared a world heritage site based on three criterions.

First, the temple complex of Wat Phou bears an exceptional testimony to the cultures of south-east Asia, and in particular to the Khmer empire, which dominate the region between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. Second, the Wat Phou temple complex is an outstanding example of the integration of a symbolic landscape of great spiritual significance to its natural surroundings. The final criteria was related to a recognition of the Hindu symbolism, that referring to the relationship between nature and humanity, for Wat Phou exhibits a remarkable complex of monuments and other structures over an extensive area between the river and the mountain, some displaying outstanding architecture and many containing great works of arts, and with all expressing an intense religious conviction and commitment (Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department, field data collection, December 2011).

Wat Phou Champasak, before becoming the second world heritage site in Lao PDR, had been surveyed and researched by UNESCO. UNESCO first got involved in the site as long ago as 1974, and then carried out further projects between 1985 and 1986. Between 1987 and 1990, two projects were carried out aimed at the preservation of the site – run by UNESCO and the UNDP. As a consequence, a

provincial decree was launched in 1988 protecting the site, with specialist staff introduced in 1989. In 1997/1998, UNESCO undertook more surveys of and research into Wat Phou, as well as the surrounding area, this time co-operating with the Laotian government. After that, UNESCO asked the Laotian government to write a proposal to UNESCO in order for the site to be considered as a World Heritage site, and then in 2001, the site was registered as such; thereafter, its name spreading throughout the world.

However, since becoming a world heritage site, the principle landowner of the entire property has remained the Lao government; the provincial and district authorities protect and manage the site, but academic and technical inputs are provided by UNESCO. The Ministry of Information and Culture, through its site management office, owns all parts of the Monument Management Zone (Zone 4); moreover, the central government has assigned other Ministries a range of responsibilities in terms of monitoring or preserving the site, as follows:

- Ministry of Communication, Transportation, Post and Construction – responsible for establishing the rules in terms of monitoring the land designated for new construction activities.
- Ministry of Industry and Handicrafts - monitors land use.
- Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry - sets the rules for use of the land.
- Ministry of Information and Culture - monitors land use around the historical monuments, archaeological sites and cultural landscape.
- Ministry of Finance - monitors the use and issuing of land titles and collects land use taxes.

At Wat Phou Champasak, as well as around the Champasak cultural landscape in general, some of the surviving evidence provides clues to the basic design thinking of the time, showing the outstanding qualities of this world cultural landscape. By recognizing this value, the Lao government has done its best to manage, protect and research the archeological and anthropological data and information gained from the area, in cooperation with many Lao and international organizations. As a consequence, the research carried out has been valuable and progressive. In 1993, for example, the Wat Phou temple complex was given national

heritage status, followed by World Heritage status – as judged by UNESCO, at the end of 2001. Since that time, Wat Phou site and the Champasak cultural landscape has received more attention from the Lao Communist Party Committee. The Champasak provincial authorities, the various authorities under Champasak and other two districts, those which cover the heritage sites, have managed, protected and developed the sites following the conservation management plans and regulations set out by the Lao government, coordinating with UNESCO (Vat Phu-Champasak-Laos, 2011).

2.6 Characteristics of Wat Phou Champasak

Wat Phou Champasak temple complex is located at the foot of Phou Kao Mountain, overlooking the Champasak flood plain and the Mekong River. The shrine itself is built on a natural terrace of Phou Kao Mountain, where a freshwater spring flows out of the rock. The temple complex as a whole is laid out along the lines of a linear plan stretching 1,400 meters on an east-west axis, rising up by the lower slopes of the mountain from the plain below. The temple complex was designed to be approached from the east and to impress the worshippers with the sanctity of the place, with the Lingaparavata visible behind. This axial layout is rare for a Khmer temple and reflects the conscious use of the natural terrain to place maximum focus on the Lingaparavata (Phakhanxay, 1999: 56)

2.6.1 Characteristics of the Landscape

Some inscriptions belonging to the fifth and sixth century AD do mention a sanctuary built on the hill - contemporary to the founding of the ancient city, but this building has since disappeared and has been replaced by the religious complex. This latter complex was built during the first part of the sixth century, with some additions and reconstructions in the seventh and eighth centuries. The temple complex, built along an east-west axis, extends 1.4 kilometers up the slope, starting from the plain and ending about 100 meters above it.

Moving east from the plain, one first meets two large *barrays* (artificial lakes of religious and practical use) which represent the ocean surrounding the earth, and also serve as reservoirs. After the lakes is a terrace built of sandstone blocks, on which a modern pavilion has been erected. A causeway lined with sandstone posts

leads to a large terrace supporting two symmetrical buildings (sandstone and late rites) with marvelous carved frontages. These two rectangular constructions, each containing an inner courtyard, certainly had a religious function, although their exact use has yet to be ascertained, and the traditional theory of a 'men's palace' and 'women's palace' is without scientific foundation. From this point, a pathway lined with roofed galleries (now in ruins) leads to the first staircase, and on the left, one can see the remains of a small building (the middle of C.XI) said to be dedicated to *nandin* (the sacred bull and Shiva's stead).

The first staircase leads to an elongated terrace supported by tiers, and at the end is a second staircase where two small buildings (C.XIII - now collapsed) once stood, each of which contained a *dvarapala* (a door-keeper). The northern building is still standing, and the statue of a man here holds a mace in one hand and has placed the other on his heart in order to show respect. Local historians have identified him as the legendary king *Kammatha*, to whom the construction of Wat Phou is ascribed. From the top of the second staircase runs a gently sloping pathway made of sandstone slabs, which leads to a third staircase which gives access to the penultimate terrace which supports six ruined brick towers (beginning C.XI). These towers contain Shiva's representations in the shape of a *Linga*.

Finally, an imposing architectural mass of sandstone blocks constructed in seven tiers (it can be climbed using a central staircase of seven flights; each of eleven steps) supports the upper terrace, on which the main sanctuary is built. As in all Khmer sanctuaries, it is flanked on the southern side by a small edifice traditionally called the 'library'; though it certainly never contained books. This is bordered on the west by a large stepped portico, partly seated on the bedrocks, and pierced with two doors which give access to the sacred spring area. Carved in the rock supporting the portico, behind the sanctuary, is a low relief representing the *Trimurti*, the Hindu trinity: *Shiva* - the principle god of the sanctuary in the center, *Brahma* on the right and *Vishnu* on the left (Ministry of Information and Culture, 1995)

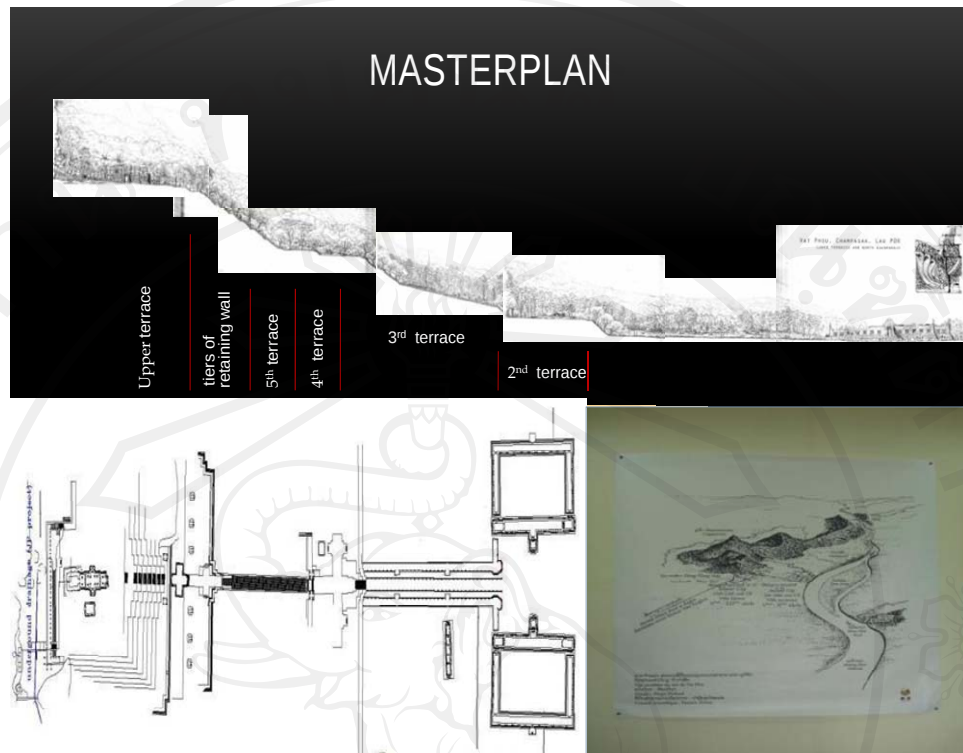


Figure 2.5: Map of the Landscape at Wat Phou Champasak

Source: Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department (field data collection, December 2011)

2.6.2 History of the Surviving Structures

The monument complex at Wat Phou was developed over a long period. The earliest remains found are from the seventh century AD, but much of what can be seen now is later, as there was a major restoration which took place between the eleventh and twelfth centuries by the rulers of Angkor, who maintained the site up to the fourteenth century. The main shrine was converted from Hinduism to Buddhism in the thirteenth century AD and has retained an important local and religious function up to the present day.

At Wat Phou temple complex, most of the buildings survive as ruins standing up to the top of the wall, apart from the complex at Wat Phou itself, where a number of surviving monumental structures remain, including: two large ponds at the front, a holy road, two palaces (men's and women's), a statue of the legendary king

Kammatha, a staircase, the main sanctuary, a sacred spring, and other Buddhist buildings to the north of the sanctuary.

During my field work in December 2011 at Wat Phou, I was guided by a member of staff from the Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department, who took me around the site and also helped explain about the history and characteristics of some of the surviving structures, those which are outstanding examples of the structures at Wat Phou and attract visitors from around the world. This site, as well as containing historical and archaeological Khmer architectural examples, is situated on the slopes of a mountain, and as a result, gives fantastic natural views.

The pictures below show outstanding examples of the structures at Wat Phou Champasak:



Figure 2.6: Photo taken in December 2011 of two large ponds or *barrays* at the front and to the east of Wat Phou

Source: Author, field data collection in December 2011

The two large ponds (*barrays*) near the entrance were dug during the tenth to eleventh centuries, and are important because they were related to the religious ceremonies of the Khmer. The ponds are named in turn the “men’s” and

“women’s” ponds, with the men’s pond on the right-hand side of the entrance and the other on the left. Both are the same size, at 200 by 600 meters. These are believed to have been constructed to represent the ocean surrounding the earth, and in a practical sense served as reservoirs and irrigation sources for the local people. In addition, pilgrims used the ponds to wash their bodies before joining the religious ceremonies, as it was believed that the water in the ponds was sacred; it could wash bad things from the body, leaving only good things inside.



Figure 2.7: The Holy Road; Photo taken in December 2011

Source: The author, during field data collection

The picture above shows the holy road, and in the tenth century the Hindus used this road during their religious ceremonies. The king, queen, prince, princess and other followers, before making merit at the top of the mountain (in the main sanctuary), went through a religious ceremony held by the Hindustan, during which time they had to proceed around the holy road and the ponds three times, and after which the religious ceremony could be held within the main sanctuary.

Up to now this road has been preserved; its meaning connected to the past. It is now used as a path for monks to use while holding religious ceremonies, such as candlelit processions and alms-giving ceremonies on the last day of the festival held at this site. As a result, this road is still called the holy or strategic road.



Figure 2.8: The Men's Palace; To the Right of the Path to the Main Sanctuary

Photo taken in December 2011

Source: The author during field data collection

Figure 2.8 shows the north side of the pathway to the main sanctuary, or the men's palace. The palace construction is valuable and has great meaning, representing as it does the main concept in Hinduism - the relationship between humans and nature. Moreover, it also shows the artistic layout of Khmer architecture. The palace was used by the men and was where they were clothed prior to joining the religious ceremonies up at the sanctuary. It was built between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, and opposite the palace is another, to the south of the pathway, which was used by the women. Both are of the same size and style.



Figure 2.9: The Legendary King – *Kammatha*; Photo taken in December 2011

Source: The author during field data collection

The man standing acted as the door keeper, and local history identifies him as the legendary King *Kammatha*, to whom the construction of Wat Phou is ascribed. He is holding a mace in one hand - to protect the sacred place and the pilgrims, while the other hand is placed on his heart to show respect to the pilgrims coming to make merit. This statue was created at the end of the twelfth century. Before going up to the sanctuary, visitors worship and pray for happiness and wealth at this statue.



Figure 2.10: Staircase; Photo taken in December 2011

Source: The author during field data collection

Visiting Wat Phou Champasak complex, visitors always visit the main sanctuary at the top of the temple. Going up to the main sanctuary, they climb the staircase shown above which leads to heaven and consists of seven tiers, with eleven steps on each tier. It was built for use by the King and other lords only, to climb when making merit at the top. On each side of the staircase are soldiers sitting. The staircase was also used to represent a crossroad between heaven and hell. As result of its construction, this staircase is called the ‘seven tier wall’ or ‘the heaven staircase – seven tiers’.

Similar to the Holy Road, the meaning of this site has been preserved and connects to the past, as it is imagined to be a crossroads between heaven and earth. According to local history, this staircase was used only by kings and other lords in the past; however, it is now used by many types of people – who climb it to see the main sanctuary.



Figure 2.11: Main Sanctuary at the Top of Wat Phou; Photo taken in December 2011

Source: The author during field data collection

The main sanctuary is composed of a front part made of sandstone, with three doors (to the south, east and north), and a back part made of brick, as well as the *cella* (the sanctuary itself), which shelters the *Linga*. This sanctuary would have been, at least during certain times, permanently dowsed with water which was conveyed from a sacred spring. There are *Dvarapala* (door keepers) and *Devatas* or

Apsaras (minor female divinities) carved on the exterior of the sandstone walls (at the front).

The sanctuary was the most sacred point of the temple and is located at the very top. It has construction points representing *Shivalinga* (rather than *Shiva*), the god of Hinduism, but was turned into a Buddhist temple in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the period of the seventh *Xaya-Voramanh*, the last Khmer king. In the fourteenth century, the Fa-ngum King from the Lanna Kingdom (present day northern Thailand) brought Buddhism to Laos, so people in the area started worshipping Buddhism from this point on.

The sanctuary was first built in the seventh century during the reign of the second *Xaya-Voramanh* and now contains three more recent statues of Buddha, which block the central access to the *cella*.



Figure 2.12: Sacred Spring to the Southwest of the Sanctuary; Photo taken in December 2011

Source: The author during field data collection

The sacred spring is located behind the stepped portico – in a closed precinct blocked to the south by a wall, to the north by rocks and to the west by the foot of the cliff (where the sacred spring drips from the ceiling of the rock shelter). It is believed that the water flows out of the rock is very sacred, particularly Buddhist

people consider. It can cure disease or remove bad things from the body. The spring flows out from the rock all year, and is called the “sacred spring” by local villagers. As a result, it is worshipped and imagined to be special.



Figure 2.13: Wat Phou Champasak Office and Museum ;Photo taken in December 2011

Source: The author during field data collection

Focusing on the meaning and importance of monument heritage, and particularly monument management, in 1987/1988, the Lao government opened an academic center in Champasak District called Wat Phou Champasak Museum, its purpose being to manage and to protect the monument zone, under the control of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Around the same time, two projects under UNESCO and UNDP were set up to manage and protect the Wat Phou temple complex, in which Lao and foreign experts gathered 700 pieces from the monuments and registered them at the museum, and these are now displayed in the museum for the tourists to look at before going to see Wat Phou itself. This initiative will help the younger gain an understanding of the history of Wat Phou Champasak temple complex and the ancient city in Champasak District.

Due to the success of the above initiative, Wat Phou Champasak temple complex was guaranteed a Lao national heritage classification in 1993; however, the most meaningful aspect of this research is that the current and future generations will be able to appreciate the site; observe the techniques used to protect and restore the surviving structures (Khankham, 2003).

2.7 Protection of Wat Phou Monument

Lao PDR ratified the World Heritage Convention in 1987 and in so doing, acknowledged the government's responsibility to conserve its national heritage - both natural and cultural, as well as any specific world heritage sites. This responsibility has since been given a legal basis within the passing of a series of laws and decrees at the national, provincial and district levels, either focused on national heritage as a whole, or on specific aspects or locations.

Most recently (June 1997), a decree by the President regarding the preservation of cultural, historical and natural heritage (No. 03\PR) has set out a framework for the protection of national heritage, including under articles 11 and 12, the prevention of damage to and control of works at archaeological sites and monuments (also articles 13/14) and the regulation of archaeological work, in particular at excavation sites (articles 18 to 27). Responsibility for enforcing the decree is placed with the Ministry of Information and Culture, the province and district administrations and the village administrative authorities (article 9).

The Wat Phou Champasak temple complex area is protected by a Provincial Decree passed in October 1988 (No. 38\88), which defines a large protection zone extending from just west of Wat Phou to the Mekong River, and including not just the temple ruins, but also the ancient city, recognizing the existence of substantial surviving earthworks. Within the protection zone are three preservation areas covering the Wat Phou temple complex itself and other temples. Also within the protection zone, excavation and looting are forbidden (articles 2\1, 2 and 4), as is building on earthworks (articles 2/3) and the removal of trees from the forest on Phou Kao Mountain (article 3). Special permission is required for irrigation projects impacting on earthworks (articles 2/3) within the preservation areas. These regulations are intended to be quite strict, with a prohibition placed on all building

activity (article 5\5), theft (article 5\2), damage (article 5\1) and the introduction of livestock (article 5\6). There is a 100 meter buffer zone around each preservation area, in which all new construction is prohibited and the removal of existing houses is encouraged, apart from in the village of Ban Nongsa.

The existing decrees are concerned principally with protection only of the archaeological sites themselves, though there is some recognition that the landscape setting of the sites is also important in terms of the protection of trees on the mountains around Wat Phou, but nothing in the decrees protects the character of the villages or of the remainder of the landscape.

Enforcing of the decrees is the responsibility locally of the Museum Office, which is a part of the district information and culture organization. In addition to its regulatory work, the Office is also responsible for the management, maintenance and conservation of Wat Phou temple. Implementation to date has not been effective in all respects, and with recent examples of damage done within the Champasak Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone, there is a considerable amount of remaining conservation work to be done at Wat Phou, and the standards of maintenance throughout the site to date have been variable (Phakhanxay, 1999: 96-98)

2.8 Tourist Facilities and Statistics

Currently, visiting Wat Phou Champasak temple complex is reasonably comfortable, and there is controlled access to Wat Phou itself. At Wat Phou there are basic facilities provided such as a secure perimeter, good staff, a ticket office, toilets, a car park and basic information provided (initial orientation signs and multi-lingual leaflets).

In terms of tourist numbers at Wat Phou, the number of visitors visiting the site has increased steadily each year, testifying to the continued importance of the site for the local population, as well as the increased international interest. Proper planning and appropriate measures have ensured that this increasing popularity has not damaged the site. During my semester break in early 2011, I collected background information from the Wat Phou Champasak World Heritage Department based at the temple complex, including statistics regarding the number of tourists visiting the site

between 1991 and 2008, as can be seen in Table 1.1. However, during my follow-up fieldwork visit at the end of 2011, I also collected statistics for visitor number between 2009 and 2011, as can be seen in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1: Number of Visitors to Wat Phou Champasak: 2009-2011

Year	Domestic Visitors	Foreign Visitors	Total
2009	18145	30874	49019
2010	22709	35032	57741
2011	25662	44587	70249

Source: Data collection in December 2011

In the past, although Wat Phou Champasak was an historical and archaeological site, not many people around the world knew about it and the number of tourists visiting the site was comparatively low, and the provision of services for tourists, both at the site and in terms of accommodation and general services, was still limited, with only around 7500 visitors visiting Wat Phou Champasak temple complex each year. However, since it was declared a World Heritage site in 2001, its name has spread around the world, attracting both domestic and foreign tourists, with around 70,000 people now visiting the site each year.

2.9 Transportation

Champasak District, where Wat Phou is located, is on the western bank of the Mekong River, and shares a border with three other districts and one neighboring country. To the north it shares a border with Phonthong District, to the south Sukhuma District, to the east is the Mekong River and to the west is Thailand. It is therefore convenient in terms of communications, tourism, trade and transportation.

Tourists who wish to visit the site can arrive in two ways; by water and over land. Using the river, tourists can take a boat from the north (from Pakse) to Champasak District, taking in the views provided along the river, noting the lifestyles of the people living along the river banks. By land is currently the more comfortable way, as tourists can approach the site from both sides of the Mekong River; using road no. 13 from Pakse to Champasak District, which takes only 30 minutes, or from the right bank of the River, which starts from the third kilometers mark in Phongthong

District to the south, arriving in Champasak District or at Wat Phou Champasak without needing to cross the river.

However, when visiting Champasak District, the central point of focus for tourists is Wat Phou Champasak, and the transportation infrastructure required to get there is still being developed. Being declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO meant that buses of over 45 seats could not get close to the site, so after arriving at the bus station, local buses deliver people to the temple complex, and overall, red cars, vans, motorbikes and bicycles are allowed to use the parking lot at the site. According to UNESCO there should be two bus stations at the world heritage site; the northern station is at Phaphin village and to the south it is at Dontalath village.

2.10 Wat Phou Champasak Festival

Wat Phou at first was a Hindu site, then in the middle of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries began to be influenced by Buddhism, and it has been a Buddhist site since that time. This change can be seen in the statue of the legendary king *Kammatha*, which stands next to the path up to the mountain, as nowadays the statue is always decorated in the Buddhist style - covered by yellow cloth. On the inside of the main sanctuary are Buddhist statues, and to the north of the main sanctuary are wooden shrines which act as accommodation for monks and novices and during Buddhist religious ceremonies. Other Buddhist statues of various sizes and styles from each period can also be found around the site (Khankham, 2003).

Under the influence of Buddhism, the worshipping of the sacred spirits at Wat Phou changed about 1500 years ago, so that nowadays, during the full moon of the third lunar month every year; a festival is held (usually in February) - the most important festival in the Province, and one linked to Bounvisakhabousa under Buddhism.

The procession held during Wat Phou festival is officially held over three days; however, Buddhists start travelling to Wat Phou a week before. During the festival, then besides the Buddhist religious ceremonies which preserve the traditional Lao features, traditional sports are held such as elephant racing, 'pot knocking', boat races and others. At night, performances are held such as a music show, the Lao turning dance (*lamvonglao*), a traditional art show and a trade fair, showcasing

products from southern Laos, and particularly products from Champasak Province, but from other districts as well. Every year there are also performances held by neighboring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia; bringing their unique identity to the festival, including music or traditional art. On the morning of the last day of the festival, more than 500 Buddhist monks from all parts of the country partake in religious ceremonies, such as offering food (*takbath*). At night on the same day, candlelight processions are held and are taken part in by crowds of people.

Every year, tourists and pilgrims visit the festival, from many parts of Laos as well as from abroad, though their consumption patterns at the festival are similar.



Figure 2.14: Boat Racing at the
Wat Phou Festival

Figure 2.15: Alms giving on the last
day of the Festival

Source: The author during data collection, December and February 2012

Table 2.2: Number of Tourists Visiting Wat Phou Festival

No	Tourist Origin	No. of Tourists
1	Domestic	42,142
2	Foreign	1736
Total		43,878

Source: Champasak District Tourist Department (field data collection, February 2012)

Every year during the festival, Wat Phou Champasak is crowded with tourists, both domestic and foreign, who take part in the activities and gaze at the structures of Wat Phou over a four or five day period. However, most of the tourists who visit Wat Phou festival are from across Laos, and in 2012, 42,142 domestic tourists visited the festival and bought tickets, most of who were pilgrims. In addition, 1736 foreign tourists also visited the site and bought tickets to enter the temple complex during the festival period.

However, quite a few tourists visit Wat Phou festival without buying a ticket; they spend their time visiting the various performances, the trade fair and the other activities, and this can add up to around 90,000 or 100,000 people annually.

2.11 Summary

Wat Phou Champasak is the oldest structure in Lao PDR and is located in the south of the country. Access to the site can be achieved in many ways, and accommodation and other services can be consumed in both Pakse and Champasak District, where the facilities are comfortable. People know the name of the site because it is a natural and cultural location; however, fewer people know any details about the area. Champasak District has the same name as the Province, and there are many ancient structures left in the area. Both Lao and foreign monument researchers originally identified the Hindu religion influence at the site, which occurred between the third and twelfth centuries, through the architectural constructions, which reflect the influence of Hinduism - which the ancient Khmer people believed in and worshipped at the mountain site. On top of the mountain is a rock which the Hindu people worshipped; however, they could not climb right up to the top, so constructed

rock palaces at the foot of the mountain, as structures to be used for worshipping and carrying out religious activities, calling this place Wat Phou Champasak. Since then it has become a key tourist destination.

Within the overall development of Lao PDR, tourism is one of the major growth sectors bringing revenue into the country, and Laos consists of a number of tourist sites which have natural and cultural heritage. Two of these sites have become official World Heritage destinations, one of which is Wat Phou Champasak, which is a rich and well-known monument, architecturally, historically and culturally. The significance of its cultural landscape is derived from a number of factors, not least of which is the degree to which the archaeological remains in the area have survived. The area is still relatively underdeveloped, and while individual parts of the area are very important, the true significance of the area lies in its whole.

The Champasak World Heritage and Cultural Landscape Protection Zone makes up a large part of the site in which Wat Phou Champasak is located, a site of outstanding and universal significance, one which meets the five criterion needed to meet World Heritage status. The monument management zone at Wat Phou Champasak has become a key tourist destination due to a number of factors. One of the most outstanding factors is that it is an historical and archaeological architecture site within which the development process has not caused any changes, but has actually helped to preserve the old style. However, becoming a tourist destination has led to changes in the lifestyles of people living in the villages around the site, and so they have had to be integrated into its management framework also.

The ancient monument complex at Wat Phou Champasak was declared a World Heritage site based on the meeting of three criteria:

1. The location, which is integrated with the natural views surrounding it
2. Its archaeological significance, and
3. It contrives to express the Hindu view of the relationship between nature and humanity.

Some of the individual structures at the site are of historical and architectural significance; for example, the sanctuary at the temple complex is one of

the most significant pre-Angkorian and Angkorian period structures, and an example of a relatively rare form of Khmer hill top temple structure. As well as the structures, many of the sculptures survive, as examples of the high artistic standards and levels of creativity displayed by the Khmer civilization. The other surviving structures, though in poorer condition, are also important remnants of a once great and extensive culture.

The monument complex at Wat Phou Champasak was developed over a long period of time, and earliest remains found date from the seventh century AD., but much of what survived is from later periods. A major renovation took place in the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, and the site continued to be maintained by the rulers of Angkor until the fourteenth century. The shrines at the site were converted from Hinduism to Buddhism after the thirteenth century AD, and have retained an important local and religious function up to the present day.

As a tourist destination; therefore, Wat Phou Champasak is outstanding and is highly attractive to visitors. As a result of this, the number of visitors attending the site has increased steadily over the last few years, both among Lao visitors and also the international community. Before 2001, although Wat Phou Champasak was the most famous site in Lao PDR, not many people from around the world knew about it, and so the number of tourists visiting the site was comparatively low. As a result, the provision of services for tourists at the site in terms of accommodation and others facilities was limited. However, since being declared a World Heritage site in 2001, its name has spread around the world, increasing the level of interest among people who seek something different from a tourist destination.

When visiting Champasak District, the central point of focus for tourists is the World Heritage site of Wat Phou Champasak, and as a result, transportation into the area is being developed. Tourists can currently visit the site in two ways; from along the river and over land, and since it has become a World Heritage site, UNESCO has set the rules in terms of what vehicles can enter. Since becoming a Buddhist site, a festival has been held every year at the temple, one which includes donations and offerings, traditional sports, performances of Lao traditional music and dance, and a trade fair showcasing products from southern Laos.