

**BONUS >> 16-PAGE TRAVEL GUIDE TO DYNAMIC DUBAI**

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

AUSTRALIA

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**THE ASIA ISSUE**

Hong Kong's  
culinary heart

Cruising the  
Mekong in style

Norman Foster's  
Singapore fling

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Photography  
Scott Woodward

ONCE AWASH WITH WARTIME GUNBOATS,  
THE MEKONG RIVER HAS BECOME A  
PLAYGROUND FOR LUXURIOUS CRUISING.  
ANTHONY DENNIS JOURNEYS IN STYLE FROM  
THE MEKONG DELTA IN VIETNAM TO THE  
GOLDEN TRIANGLE IN THAILAND.

Ply me a river



Full stream ahead  
The polished teak  
surrounds of the  
*MV Bassac* luxury  
cruising boat.  
Opposite: sunset  
falls over the  
Mekong Delta.



# It's moments after dawn on the Mekong Delta, the sun a mere puff of pink fairy floss above the distant riverbank.

I'M STANDING ON THE polished teak deck of a luxury riverboat, the *MV Bassac*, feeling a little like an *Indochine* bit player, and being driven to distraction by a mystery sound: *tink, tink, tink, tink*. The persistent noise is reverberating across the river from the frenetic extended Tra On floating market that has just opened for business. There it goes again: *tink, tink, tink, tink*.

What is that noise? I ask a Vietnamese crew member. He directs my gaze to a woman, chipping away at a large, solid block of ice in the middle of her canoe, its oars raised in repose. Dressed in the requisite conical straw hat and peasant-style pyjamas, she is serving iced coffees to paying river folk who reside on fishing boats and in weatherboard floating houses. But the principal trade here at Tra On is fruit; it's a Technicolor supermarket of coconut, guava, jackfruit, bananas and oranges, with some of the produce displayed on bamboo poles for easier viewing from the huddled sampans and canoes.

Today, early-morning iced coffees give way to mid-morning mourners. The *MV Bassac* crosses paths with a cross-river commuter ferry requisitioned for a funeral, the mourners dressed neck-to-toe in white. They're accompanied by a brass

**Going with the flow**  
Opposite, clockwise from top left: a riverside church; the *MV Bassac's* captain; the Tra On floating market; the interior of the *Bassac*; a Buddhist temple on the Mekong bank.



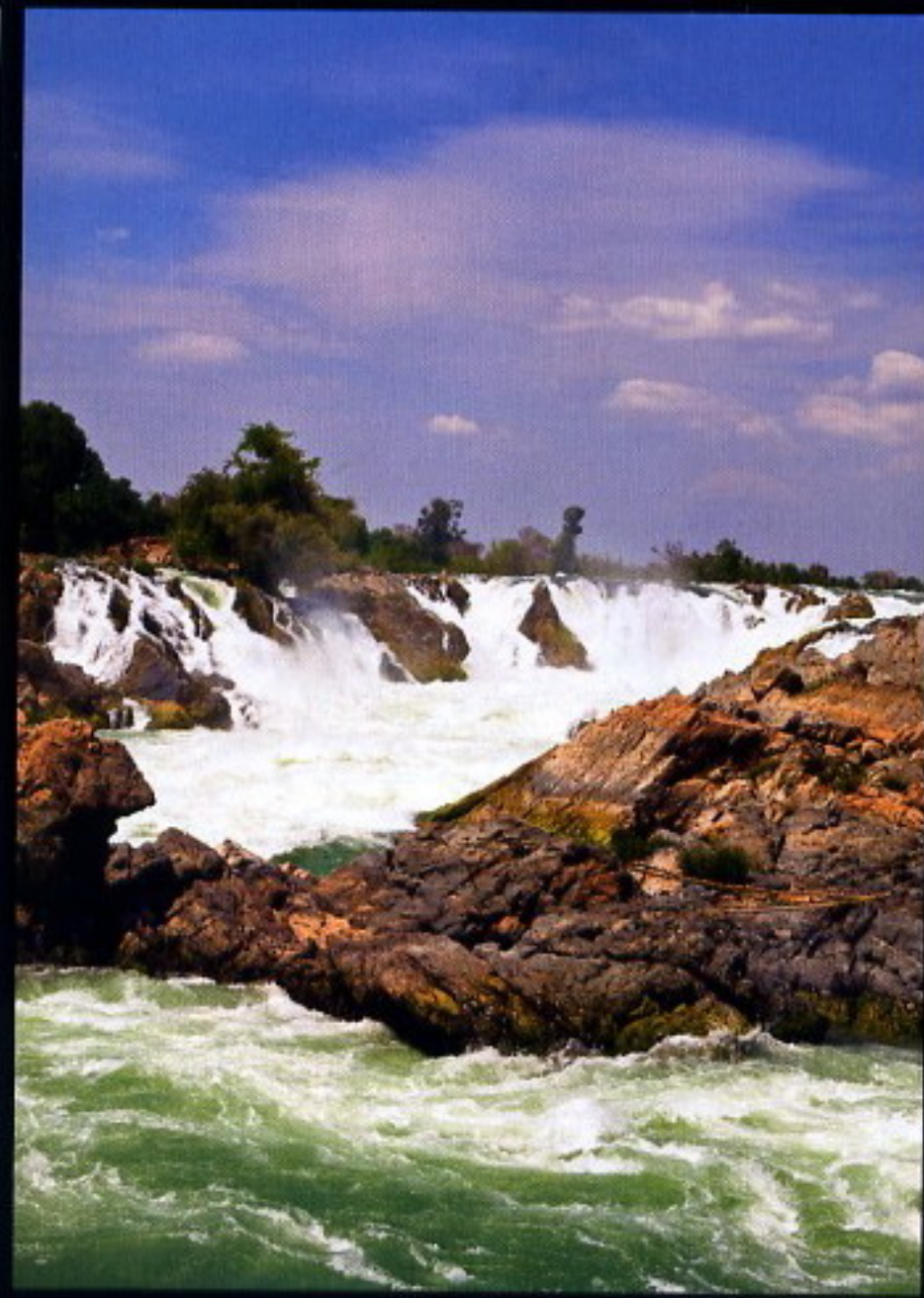
band blaring tinny tunes that echo across the river, drowning out the clamour of the ubiquitous spluttering putt-putt of dozens of passing smoky sampans and barges.

The Delta, dubbed the "nine dragons", is the point at which the river empties into the South China Sea via multiple tributaries. It's commonly known as Vietnam's rice basket but such is the volume of traffic that it can initially seem more like Vietnam's basket case. Everywhere on the Delta are heavy barges, meandering among coconut groves, orchards and mangroves, as well as industries such as sugar-cane processing, brick-making and wooden-ship building.

I'm at the beginning of a journey from the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam to the Golden Triangle in northern Thailand by riverboats. River cruising – such as that offered here on the *MV Bassac* – is booming. Such is the popularity of the modern Mekong that it's now possible to concoct a trip hopping on and off the veritable flotilla of luxury cruise vessels that ply the river and its tributaries. There are, by my estimate, nearly a dozen luxury riverboats now conveying affluent Westerners in the sort of style and comfort rarely afforded to anyone on the banks.

Robert Fletcher, director of the Australian river-cruise specialist Active Travel, believes the interest in luxury river cruises on the Mekong has sparked further enthusiasm for similar journeys in places such as India, Burma and the Amazon. Indeed, the beauty of the river cruise, as opposed to its ocean-going counterpart, lies in the fact that nearly all the action tends to occur outside the boat, rather than inside. »





As one Mekong River cruise brochure flatly puts it, "There are no captain's dinners and no bingo nights – the focus is on the local culture and environment." A boat like the teak-and-brass *RV Mekong Pandaw*, which I cruise on later in my trip, offers a sense of intimacy, not just among the passengers but with the river, and the life that exists on and beyond its banks. A voyage along the Mekong, as Fletcher points out, is also a chance to witness the changes the river is undergoing.

"The peasant rice grower is becoming harder to see in the Mekong," he says. "The floating markets are less important to the locals as more goods are transported by lorry as roads improve."

In one major sense, the Mekong remains a mystery. No one, curiously enough, seems able to determine its precise length. At a mere 4350 kilometres, it fails to make it onto most lists of the world's 10 longest rivers, usually languishing at number 11 or 12. Yet the might of the Mekong is unquestionable. It's a river that passes through an incredible six countries: Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma and China, where its source can be traced deep in the mountains of Tibet, and from which it derives its name: "turbulent river".

**T**HE *MV BASSAC* is an elegant French-Vietnamese-owned boat masquerading as a boutique hotel. On board for this two-day voyage are 17 French and Australian passengers and six crew; the chocolate-box-like *Bassac* is the perfect platform from which to observe river life.

And yet what a contrast all of this comfort represents compared to the protracted periods in the Mekong's oft-violent

**Divided we falls**  
The impassable barrier at Khone Phapheng, left. A Laotian local, right. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a porthole on the *RV Mekong Pandaw*; the Victoria Hotel speedboat; village life; inside the *Bassac*; Ban Yeuthong village on Khong Island.

history, when its waters were inhabited not by luxury riverboats, but by the gunboats of the Americans, Viet Cong and French. What's more, the landmark 19th-century French-led Mekong Exploration Commission was fraught with disasters and disappointments, and ended with the deaths of seven of its 20-strong party when it finally reached China. Even now it's impossible to make a continuous journey by large boat along the Mekong. Khone Phapheng Falls, the so-called "Niagara of the East" in southern Laos, is still an impenetrable barrier, as are a series of ill-advised dams further up river.

International Rivers, an organisation whose mission is to "protect rivers and defend the rights of communities that depend on them", said last year that Laos was placing the Mekong at risk due to its construction of dams to create hydro-power, depriving as many as 60 million villagers of fertile farmland and fisheries. Combined with the problems caused by dams, illegal logging in upland Cambodia also serves to loosen the topsoil, with the resultant unwelcome silt finding its way into the Mekong and the vast Tonle Sap



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lake. In his book *Mad About the Mekong*, detailing the 19th-century French mapping expedition of the river, John Keay summarises the Mekong's perilous predicament, which makes every monsoon season a lottery: "If the Mekong rises too high or too fast, people drown. If it rises too late, they starve."

Back on the *Bassac*, our time in the Delta is spent cruising the tributaries, mooring to walk through quiet villages, such as Mang Thit, where rice fields are studded, as is the tradition, with the gravestones of the farmers who worked the paddies. In the cooling late afternoon, we pause to drink tea and eat tropical fruits at a pre-arranged rendezvous in the shaded courtyard of a simple local house set beside emerald rice fields. Tonight, dinner is served al fresco, on the deck of the boat. A combination of Vietnamese and French flavours, the menu features sea bass, chicken, spring rolls and crêpes.

I spend a night at the comfortable faux-colonial Victoria Hotel in the river town of Chau Doc. I've travelled here by road, after the end of the *Bassac* cruise in Can Tho, the busy Vietnam-Cambodia border outpost overlooking a large river port. By early the next morning I'm back on the Mekong, having embarked on my second voyage. From the Vietnamese border, in order to keep travelling on the river, it's necessary to take a high-speed boat trip, operated by the Victoria Hotel, between Chau Doc and Phnom Penh. This trip passes through Vietnam-Cambodia immigration on the banks of the Mekong en route. The four-hour jaunt is by far the shortest of my trips along the Mekong, and it's definitely the fastest.

I spend a few leisurely days in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's lively capital propelled by a combination of foreign aid, tourism and endemic corruption, staying at the historic Raffles Hotel Le Royal, once requisitioned by the Khmer Rouge; its reputation as the capital's premier hotel is well and truly restored. Phnom Penh is the departure point for the next section of my journey, aboard the *RV Mekong Pandaw* »



# As one Mekong River cruise brochure flatly puts it, “There are no captain’s dinners and no bingo nights – the focus is on the local culture and environment.”

on the Tonle Sap River, a tributary of the Mekong, to Kampong Chhnang on the edge of the vast Tonle Sap Lake.

Among those aboard the four-deck, shallow-draft *Pandaw* – crewed by a mix of attentive Burmese and Cambodians – is a somewhat severe Frenchman, as well as a retired military man who was once posted to Cambodia, where he learnt to speak Khmer. He’s joined by an indefatigable octogenarian Swedish couple, and two gay male couples from the US, who complain that they have already tired of the local village children constantly asking, “Are you married? Do you have children?”

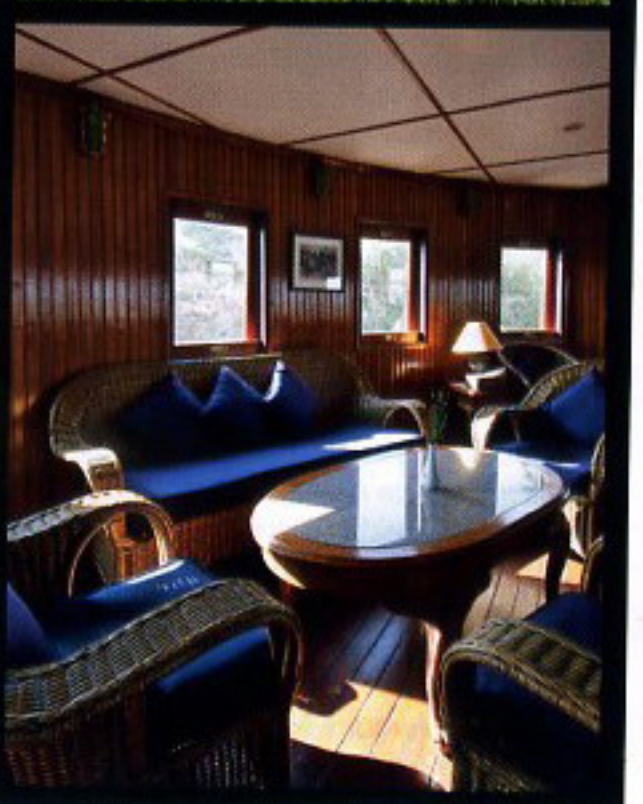
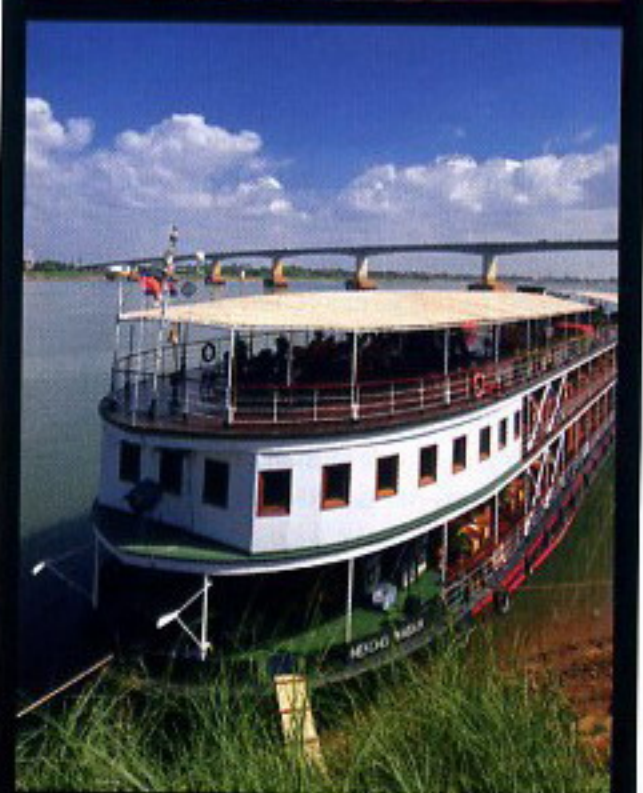
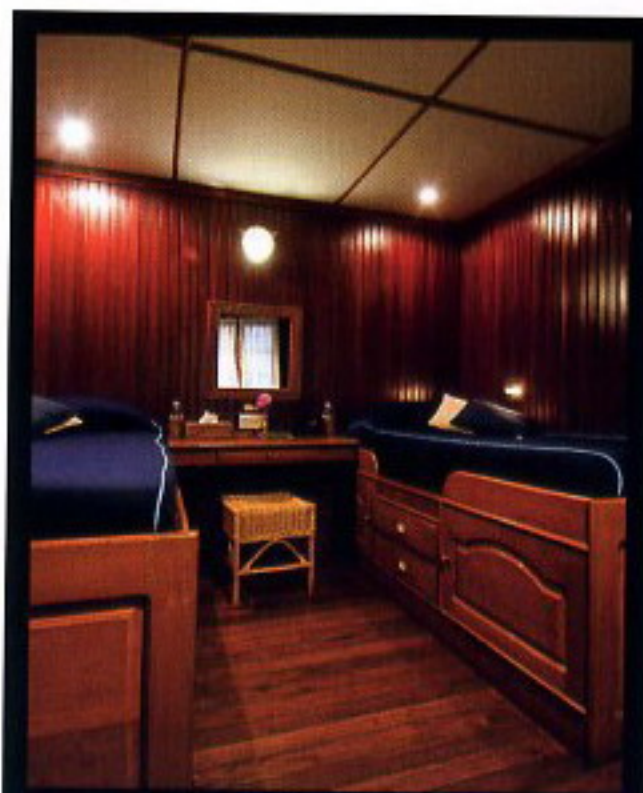
Double the size of the *Bassac* cabin, my wood-paneled “state room” on the *Pandaw* is cosily reminiscent of an oversized railway sleeper. It’s a little dark, with two single bunks, a sizeable bathroom, and chairs and tables on the shared balcony from which you can absorb the tranquil Tonle Sap drifting by.

The river flows well below the level of its tall banks, meaning that we can’t see above them from the boat. So it’s hard to believe that Peam Chi Kang, a river town of 60,000 and the location of our afternoon shore excursion, exists above us. On the terra firma of the town, passing through the requisite dusty streets, we’re buzzed by a motorbike with two squealing mature pigs tied on the back. We’re heading to a private English-language school that at other times of the day doubles as a kindergarten in a rundown stone building.

We’re invited to chat with the students, who include a couple of shy young Buddhist monks with shaved heads and dressed in saffron robes. It’s the festive season when I travel and inside, huddled at the small desks, one of the young female students sweetly wishes me “happy birthday” when she means to say “merry Christmas”, then bursts into giggles when she realises her error. These students are hoping that fluency in English will be their passport out of poverty.

**N**EARBY, AT THE LOCAL PRIMARY SCHOOL, we arrive just as the students gather around a rickety flagpole sporting a weathered Cambodian flag to perform the national anthem. It’s sobering to learn – as I scan the assembly, a collection of fresh, hopeful faces; custodians of Cambodia’s uncertain future – that during the reign of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, this school was closed and served as a makeshift prison for another form of education. Further on, at the large river community of Kampong Cham, our guilt at travelling in relative opulence through one of the poorer nations on earth is again somewhat assuaged by a visit to a local orphanage, where we’re allowed to meet the children and present gifts bought at stalls in the market.

Back on the river, the *Mekong Pandaw*’s progress is impeded by the low water level. For this reason the boat can safely go »



**River beds** From top: the sleeping quarters of the RY Mekong Pandaw; the Pandaw moored near one of the few bridges across the Mekong; the elegant interior. Opposite: a local woman herds ducks along the banks of the “mother of waters”.

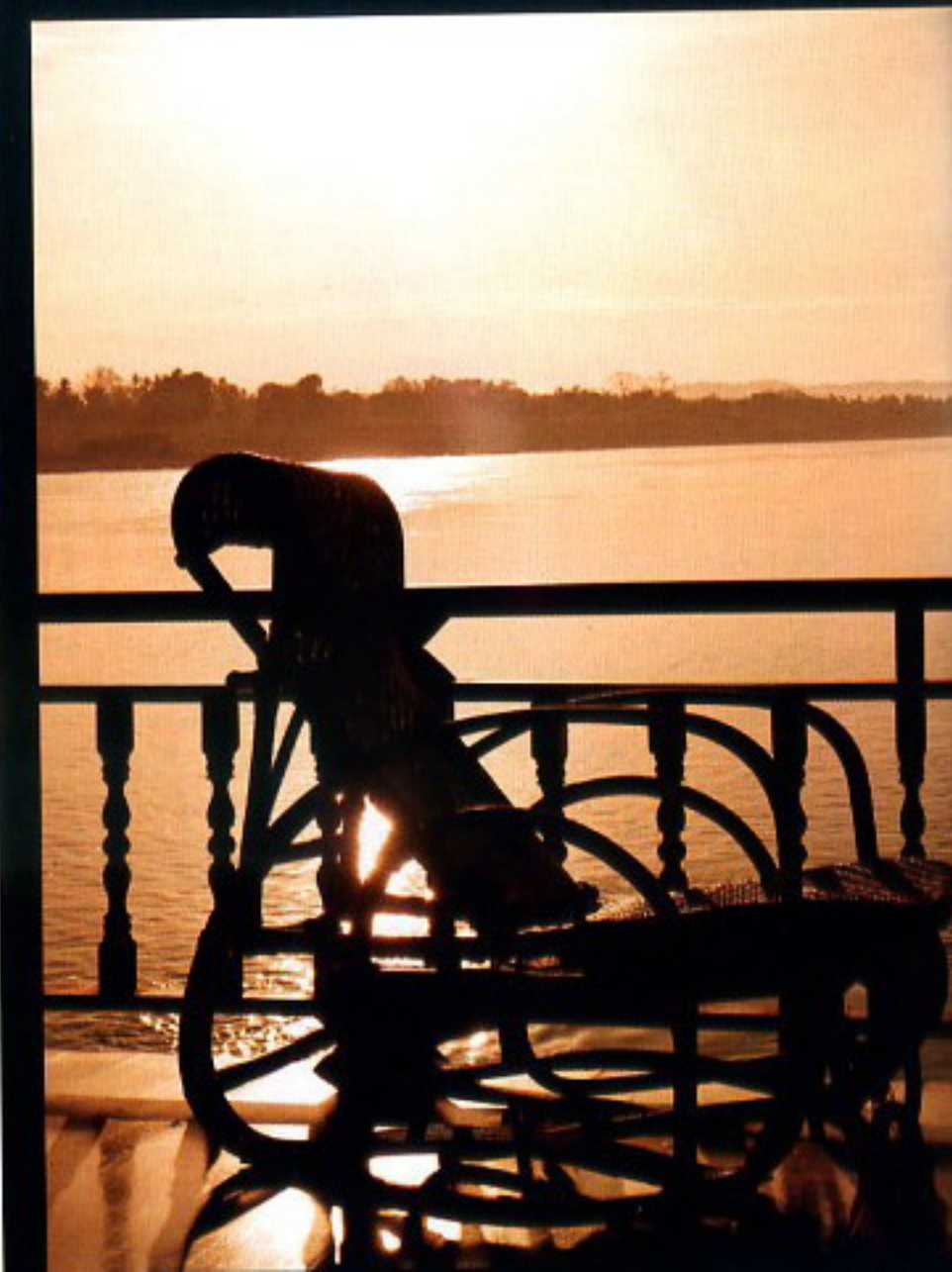
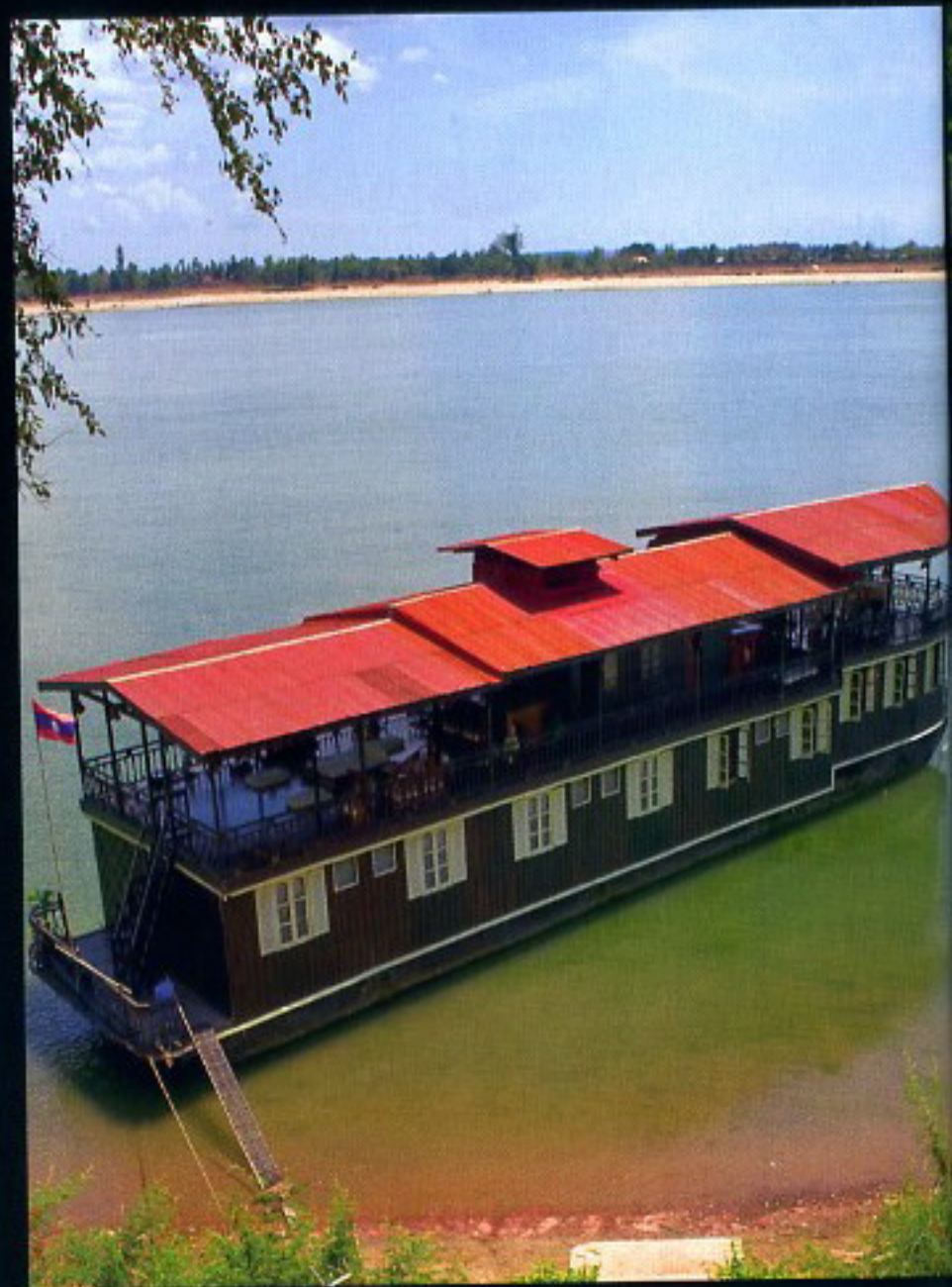
no further so we have to travel by coach the rest of the way to Siem Reap, the city adjacent to the marvels of the World Heritage-listed cultural site Angkor Archeological Park. In order to continue my journey along as much of the river as possible, I must fly south to the city of Pakse in Laos. In a country full of sleepy towns and cities, Pakse, the soporific 60,000-strong capital of the province of Champasak, is a shock after the rough charm and physical comforts of Siem Reap. And the Laotians, who live under a strict communist government, tend to be considerably more reserved with foreigners than their relatively exuberant Cambodian and Vietnamese counterparts.

Following an overnight stay in Pakse, the passengers for the 10-berth *MV Vat Phou* – all Europeans, except me – gather in a local cafe for a pre-cruise briefing before heading by bus to the Khone Phanpheng Falls, from where our journey back up the Mekong to Pakse will begin. The French-owned *Vat Phou*, originally built to ferry teak along the river, is probably the best hotel in Laos south of the capital, Vientiane. There are 10 teak-lined cabins and the deck is peppered with inviting rattan armchairs; there's a masseur in a semi-private stern section.

The French, who annexed Laos into its Indochine colonies in the 19th century, had hoped to exploit the Mekong as a passage for the transport of exports from Yunnan in southern China to Vietnam. One of the most remote parts of Laos, and indeed South-East Asia, is the region known as the 4000 Islands, where the Mekong divides into channels separated by islands, the largest of which is Khong Island. The falls, however, completely separate the lower and upper Mekong. The French devised a short-lived solution: the creation of a seven-kilometre-long railway that circumvented the falls. At the village of Xieng Di are remnants of a fine stone bridge along which the train travelled, dockside cranes and machinery, and, tucked away in the jungle, even the remains of a rusting locomotive.

The Mekong is also known as the "mother of waters", but here in Laos it can well and truly fail in its duties to its children. The *Vat Phou* moors in the afternoon beside an impoverished riverside village. Here, we're invited to buy gifts for the local kindergarten and villagers. After one look at how grimly poor and under-

**Moored and more**  
Clockwise from right:  
the *MV Vat Phou*;  
ruins at Wat Phou, the  
riverboat's namesake;  
refreshments aboard  
the *Vat Phou*; the ideal  
spot for a sundowner.





As the mist recedes, the landscape that surrounds us tantalisingly reveals itself like a slow striptease.

nourished the local people appear to be, the passengers from the boat buy virtually all the stock at the local shop. It's the middle of the day and the village's menfolk are out fishing or working the fields, while their defeated-looking wives are left to tend to dirty, coughing children. We may be interlopers, but hopefully the regular visits from the *Vat Phou* achieve some semblance of good.

In the evening, further along the river, we moor on a large sandbank, just before an exquisite sunset, and visit the ruins of a temple in the midst of jungle by the Mekong. And, with temples still firmly on the agenda, the next day it's on to our boat's namesake, Wat Phou, a World Heritage-listed, though relatively under-visited, site. It's reached from the riverside town of Champasak by tuk-tuk along a bumpy, basic road that leads to the foot of a nearly 1500-metre-high mountain. This is home to an ancient city built several hundred years before Angkor Wat. On the summit is a 15-metre-high monolith, a lingam symbol of the Hindu god Shiva, the chief reason for the temple's location.

It's believed that Wat Phou was once a Hindu place of worship, a result of the progressive waves of visitors from the sub-continent. The temple is laid out on an east-facing axis with a grand paved pathway lined with frangipani trees, denuded of their foliage, leading from the reservoirs at its base to the upper sanctuary, the holiest part of the site. From this magnificent vantage point I survey southern Laos and the wandering Mekong on which we've just travelled. Below are the ruins of two palaces that feature intricately carved Hindu lintels.

ON THE PENULTIMATE DAY OF THE JOURNEY, having flown from Pakse to the showpiece northern Laotian city of Luang Prabang, I rise in the chill before dawn to join the last of my Mekong riverboats, *Luang Say*. Before we set out, I notice a sign aboard reading: "Please be careful. Boat can sway in the rapids."

We depart Luang Prabang on by far the coldest morning of the trip, passing through a mist that obscures the towering mountains on either side of the river. Periodically, pockets of the mist clear, allowing glimpses of thatch-roofed villages and teak plantations. »



The river here is strewn with rocks and large boulders. Fortunately, the *Luang Say* has "a hardened steel hull", and we're assured the captain is sufficiently experienced to navigate this difficult section of the Mekong. Eventually, the mist recedes, the grey replaced by a duck-egg-blue sky. The landscape that surrounds us tantalisingly reveals itself like a slow striptease: steep, densely vegetated mountainsides populated by unseen Hmong tribes. On these precipitous slopes, villagers grow rice, although until recent times their primary cash crop was opium, used mainly for the production of heroin. It's the most spectacular section of the river since the Mekong Delta.

The passengers, an affable collection of Australians, Canadians, Japanese, British and Germans, sit around wooden tables on teak chairs but are free to wander around the boat. Inside the galley, a lone chef is preparing a traditional Lao lunch. On a distant bank we sight water buffalo along the river's edge; a calf, struggling to keep its head above water, is guided along, wedged between the bodies of the two adult animals.

**Here and Lao**  
Clockwise from top left: Buddha statues in Luang Prabang; monks appealing for alms; the *Luang Say*; flowers in Luang Prabang.

## GUIDE TO CRUISING THE MEKONG

### GETTING THERE

Jetstar flies from Australia to Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh (Saigon), with internal connections in Vietnam, including the Mekong Delta. There are Jetstar connections to Siem Reap and Phnom Penh; jetstar.com. The best time to visit the region is in the milder months, November to March.

### HOW TO BOOK THE CRUISES

Active Travel (Level 1, 447 Kent Street, Sydney; 02 9264 1231; First floor, Carema Centre, Canberra; 02 6249 6122; activetravel.com.au) is a river-cruise specialist. Comprehensive info, including pricing on the cruises featured in these pages, is contained in a new 28-page guide, *Riverboat Journeys*. Active Travel can also organise flights, transfers, onshore accommodation and tours.

Prices for the featured Mekong riverboats start from \$227 per person twin share, one night, for the *Bassac*; \$3300 per person twin share (low season), seven nights, for the *Pandaw*; \$619 per person twin share (low season), two nights, for the *Vat Phou*; and \$370 per person twin share, two nights, for the *Luang Say*. A transfer on the Victoria Hotel speedboat costs \$105 per person one way, with minimum four people per trip.

### WHERE TO STAY

#### CHAU DOC

**Victoria Chau Doc Hotel**  
32 Le Loi, Chau Doc Town, An Giang Province, Vietnam; +84 76 386 5010; victoriahotels-asia.com; doubles from \$142.

#### PHNOM PENH

**Raffles Hotel Le Royal**  
92 Rukhak Vithei Daun Penh, off Monivong Boulevard, Sangkat Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; +855 23 981 888; raffles.com; doubles from \$274.

#### Quay Hotel

Sisowath Quay, Phnom Penh; +855 23 992 284/+855 23 224 894; thequayhotel.com; doubles from \$175.

#### SIEM REAP

**T+L CHOICE** **Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor**  
1 Vithei Charles de Gaulle, Khum Svay Dang Kum, Siem Reap, Cambodia; +855 63 963 888; raffles.com; doubles from \$323.

#### PAKSE

**GREAT VALUE** **Champasak Grand Hotel**  
Lao-Nippon Bridge Mekong Riverside Road, Pakse, Laos; +856 31 255 111; champasakgrand.com; doubles from \$80.

#### LUANG PRABANG

**GREAT VALUE** **3 Nagas**  
Ban Vatnong, Sakkaline Road, Luang Prabang, Laos; +856 71 253 888; alilahotels.com/3nagas; doubles from \$156.

#### CHIANG RAI

**Le Meridien**  
Le Meridien Chiang Rai Resort, 221/2 Moo 20, Kwaewai Road, Tambon Robwieng Amphur Muang, Chiang Rai; +66 53 603 333; lemeridien.com/chiangrai; doubles from \$167.

Unlike the other boats, the 34-metre-long *Luang Say* has no sleeping berths, with the passengers sleeping overnight at an eco-lodge at Pakbeng, consisting of 16 pavilions on stilts, overlooking the Mekong and the surrounding mountains.

The next morning the Golden Triangle and the Thai border finally beckon. By the time I reach the Thai border at Chiang Saen, it's difficult to reconcile the fact that I have come so far on five boats and yet half the mighty Mekong River still remains ahead of me, slithering away into the distant mountains towards China.

I am a few-thousand-odd kilometres upriver since I left the Mekong Delta. It's a few weeks, and four countries, later – and it's time for some dry land and a stiff iced coffee. +