

THE MOTHER OF

*water**Cruising up the Mekong in meditation*

A river cruise, one might argue, is one of the best ways to see a place, watching real life go by from the ship's deck (or even your bed). As the water guides you quietly, the laps against the wood below rock you between the real and the surreal – a perfect place to venture into meditation.

And then, as the vessel docks, a new kind of vital access is found, one that a car, or plane, or touristy motorbike may never have been able to reach. The perfect balance between peaceful and energetic, wrapped into one odyssey.

The Mekong River, or in Lao-Thai toponymy, “mother of water”, has long been the provenance of life for six kindred Asian countries. From its Tibetan Plateau, this life force runs through China's Yunnan province,

Burma (or call it Myanmar), Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and mouths to the sea in Vietnam's Mekong Delta.

The river itself carries a natural history of biodiversity, second only to the Amazon, which means that seeing giant soft-shell turtles, stingrays, freshwater dolphins, Siamese crocodiles and hundreds of bird species were all on the list for my trip.

Of course, since it's a “living river”, the array of local people living in their floating homes and praying at temples on the banks brings another dimension to river cruising. The reality of river life was one of the most fascinating aspects of this cruise, a moment's reflection of what was seen as good and even bad in this life.

It was American writer Tucker Elliot, in his *The Rainy Season*, who said: “No

matter the border, the Mekong has been an indiscriminate giver and taker of life in Southeast Asia for thousands of years. It's a paradox like civilization's other great rivers – be it the Nile, Indus, Euphrates, Ganges or China's Sorrow the Huang He – for without its waters, life is a daily struggle for survival, yet with its waters, life is a daily bet that natural disasters and diseases will visit someone else's village, because it's not if, but when it's going to happen that's the relevant question.”

Although the river has been a conduit for local people and their goods for centuries – with the first civilizations dating back to the first century Indianised-Khmer culture of Funan in the Mekong Delta – it has historically been rather difficult to navigate. But for an explorer of the

world with a keen interest in uncovering the secluded, a journey on and off a riverboat here made absolute adventure sense. Today, high-tech boats such as Aqua Expeditions' Aqua Mekong – which took its maiden voyage last year – mostly circumvent the difficulties of rapids or waterfalls, and certainly the forgotten French Indochina War's underwater bombs. But of course they do it in the best luxury you could possibly desire.

My own journey floated from just outside the Vietnamese city of Saigon, or as it is also called, Ho Chi Minh City, in the Mekong Delta, and ended in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. The Mekong Delta is the perfect spot to commence a journey: with factories dotting the river's edge and people working their commercial ventures all

around our boat, the activity was infinite. I arrived at this luxury vessel and realised that, for the next few days, I'd be floating around these unknown worlds, and that jumpstarted my excitement.

On board the vessel, life was festive. Days started off with dark roasted local coffee in bed, watching as the morning duties of the Vietnamese riverbank people began: washing clothes and donkeys, sewing nets for fishing, and arranging their floating markets with fresh produce and handmade crafts for the day's sales. A post-breakfast excursion lifted me out on a skiff

and into the tributaries of this great river. With a bicycle and a sunhat, I took to the rice paddies, waving at schoolgirls in neat green-and-brown Catholic uniforms. The little bike paths ran from paddy to paddy, allowing everyone access to the others' villages – a





connection much deeper than social media, I thought.

Afternoons were reserved for naps and working out in the gym, while watching little fishing boats rev by. When the sun came down every day, I watched as the cattle were herded home and the villages were bathed in candlelight, all to the soft chanting emanating from the temples nearby. Twilight here was momentary, but that last little bit of life force was respected and celebrated all along the riverbanks.

With my legs crossed, facing the water, I strummed deep breaths and felt the ancient world whisper me to a deep meditation.

By evening it was time for socialising and sharing and food. Meals on the boat, utterly traditional affairs by Australian Bangkok-based chef David Thompson, included curries from Thailand, minimal broths from Laos and unusual Khmer food that I'd never heard of before: it was as wild as the scenery outside, and just as wondrous. Late at night, under a scattering of stars, the pool allowed for cooling down and taking in the sounds of biodiversity below. Forget the French Champagne; this was about being setting-appropriate, an escape from all things pretentious and a return to reverence for the divergence of the world.

Vietnam, and going up the river, wasn't beautiful in a traditional sense. The Amazon, for instance, has a natural beauty that presents itself as you cruise along. But here, it is more about the observance of a beautiful life, understanding how the simple things can be done in a mindful and respectful way. As I looked out at people actively involved in life's daily chores and time-fillers, I saw the splendour of the ordinary; the philosophy of "how" and not "what" suddenly became clear, and I was able to see how people with much less materially had so much more happiness, as they spent their lives in single-minded actions, appreciating (and honouring) the moment so much more. The lessons, although they are ancient, were relevant and right for me in this instance, as I cruised down this river of life, with a deeper knowing than I had arrived with.

After a few days, we crossed into Cambodia. The country, substantially less developed, immediately offered its pristine and naïve allure, from the banks, to everyone on the boat. With Cambodia's difficult heritage of the last century, the water seemed to have healed it, taking the blood of the country and washing it down the river to the endless sea. Life on the banks appeared basic, but the waves from the locals and the invitations into their

homes for some green tea were certainly sincere.

I wanted to experience the temples of Cambodia – not just the famed and ancient Angkor Wat, but also the living temples where people who lived on the banks of the rivers delivered their offerings and spent their days in prayer. A little skiff brought me to a structure with pointy-hatted gods and ornate curls around its edges. I found a quiet spot to sit in prayer. Nearby, local ladies were using silkworms for weaving, kids were running home from school with oversized backpacks, older priests were burning palm trees as offerings, and my mind stopped. I sat in total silence. The peace of the country now, the silence I carried from days on the water, and the sense of adventure took me deep into meditation.

When I opened my eyes, a stray dog had cuddled up against my leg and the temple was abandoned for the evening. A slow walk back to the boat gave me a moment to reflect. It is in the exploration of the wild and the unknown that we are able to see ourselves more clearly.

Luckily, the world has become small and accessible, and a little hop on a plane to a boat that commandeers a famous maternal river is just one way of finding the silence, and then all of the adventure within us. ■

How to boat the Mekong River:
Aqua Expeditions: aquaexpeditions.com

Where to stay on either end:
In Siem Reap – Amansara: amanresorts.com/amansara/home.aspx
In Phnom Penh – The Raffles Hotel le Royal: raffles.com/phnom-penh/
In Saigon – The Park Hyatt: saigon.park.hyatt.com/en/hotel/home.html

How to get there:
From Johannesburg, Cathay Pacific flies to Hong Kong daily, with short hops to Siem Reap, Phnom Penh or Saigon. Visit cathaypacific.com for their latest Premium Economy seats.