



FACES OF THE MEKONG

Keen to explore the Mekong Delta in idyllic luxury, VERNE MAREE embarks on a four-night up-river cruise on the new *Aqua Mekong* from Ho Chi Minh City in the south of Vietnam to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.

The Majestic Mekong

Described as the lifeblood of Southeast Asia, the **Mekong River** arises in the mountains of Tibet, then flows through six countries – China, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam – before joining with the sea through nine different river mouths, evocatively called “the nine dragons”.

The **Mekong Delta** – the “rice bowl” of the entire region – is a vast maze of rivers, swamps and islands that is home to some 17 million souls.



She may be one of about 20 cruise ships plying between Saigon and Phnom Penh, but the *Aqua Mekong* – launched in September 2014 – is indubitably in a luxurious league of her own. Apart from the sterling service and top-notch food you might expect for the price, she has the edge in other areas, too.

For example, carrying along her own four comfortable flat-bottomed skiffs avoids having to rely on local boat operators to get ashore, or to explore the smaller waterways. You can go off the beaten track, exploring remote places of cultural interest and meeting people who are still pleased to meet you, too.

In fact, just as much as the vast and stunning riverine scenery, I suspect it's the faces of the people along the way that will linger longest in our memory. From the handsome Vietnamese bartender who mixed our cocktails by night and served our eggs in the morning, to the beaming vendors of fruit, flowers, chicken feet and skinned rats, to the hospitable Khmer villagers and their shyly smiling schoolchildren, I've never felt more welcome as a traveller than I did in the Mekong delta.

Accommodation

"Restrained style" would be a good description of the *Aqua Mekong*. Featuring acres of sophisticated polished teak and low-key silks, it's exactly the opposite of tacky. Imagine a classic riverboat (or you could just look at the picture) – two decks each holding just ten suites topped by a third deck. Deck Three has a cool and spacious lounge and bar, a covered alfresco bar and pool at the pointy end. You'll find a sunny deck area at the back, plus a gym and a boutique.

Our beautifully comfortable suite is one of six that have a balcony; the others simply have more interior space. Though I usually like to laze lizard-like on a sun-lounger while Roy the Polar Bear chills indoors, this time we both agree that you don't really need a balcony during the hotter summer months – on the last day of our late-April cruise, the mercury rose to 38°C (100°F).

Torrents of water from the generous rain-shower put my man in good humour, while I'm delighted by twin vanity basins and an illuminated makeup mirror. We both love the plentiful storage and the enormous bed flanked by – hurray! – lamps with dimmer switches.

Dining and drinking

Food is an important part of the *Aqua Mekong* adventure. Australian Adrian Broadhead is in charge of a crew of Cambodian chefs, delivering a stunningly good menu that alternates between Western and Southeast Asian cuisine. (The menu was developed by executive chef David Thompson, whose Nahm restaurant in Bangkok was the first Southeast Asian restaurant to win a Michelin star.)

Breakfast is fresh local fruit, some stewed, some topped with proper yoghurt; you can also order from a menu of hot dishes, and indulge in fresh French-style breads and still-warm croissants.

One lunch includes veggie crudités to dip into a sublime anchovy and garlic sauce, a variety of superb thin-crust pizzas with warm ratatouille and a mixed green mixed salad, rounded off with a delectable coconut cream cassata. For another, two hawker-type stands offer Vietnamese beef *pho* (soup) and a fiery Malaysian chicken laksa, crammed with fresh laksa leaves, bean sprouts, crispy bean curd, boiled eggs, crushed peanuts and dried chilli – the best I've ever had.

As for dinner, here's just one to salivate over: a starter of crispy river prawns, followed by four Asian-style dishes: fish curry, stir-fried squid and veggies, a beef dish and then gorgeous chilli crab; plus banana fritters with coconut ice cream. Uniformly heavenly.

Beer and wine, including a delightful Aussie sparkling, are included in the price; but there's a full bar to choose from, too, and the masterfully mixed cocktails are well worth US\$8 a pop.

Activities

Two guides accompany the ship at any time, one for every ten guests, says our experienced guide Chariya on the 90-minute ride from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) to My Tho, where we join the ship. Never one to run out of words, he improves the shining hour-and-a-half with a swift overview of Vietnam's political geography, economics and recent history.

Each day offers both a morning and an afternoon excursion, each

two to three hours long. And on both occasions, you can choose a bike-ride or a walk. (We walked.)

DAY ONE: Around 8am, two skiffs are brought around, one for those who are off on a bike ride to **Binh Thanh Island**, where villagers weave mats and baskets from reeds and water hyacinths – that's the green foliage we see floating on the river – and the other for us, the walkers.

We're off to the **river port town of Sa Dec** and its **market**, more pleasant than most because it's so clean, many of the stalls are on the riverside, the vendors are friendly and their wares are so interesting. We see bamboo shoots, water chestnuts, purple yams, pumpkin flowers, and all the mint, morning glory and multiple varieties of coriander and other greenery that gets chucked into *pho* (soup). Speaking of soup, nervously clucking chickens await their imminent end less than a metre away from a neat heap of their slain and plucked brethren.

Live golden carp may be bought and released back into the river, an act thought to earn Buddhists spiritual merit. Less pretty is a rank heap of rice-paddy rat carcasses.

Rice, in case you're interested, sells for between 50 US cents and a dollar per kilo, depending on its quality. And, after a lightning-quick lesson in market Vietnamese from Chef Adrian, I successfully buy him 2kg of sticky noodles for just 73 cents.

Sa Dec town was made famous by Margeurite Duras' semi-autobiographical novel *The Lover* and the 1992 film of the same name. We visit **The Lovers' House**, built in 1895 as the rich family home of the hero of this story and now operated by the local authority as a popular tourist site.

After lunch and a bit of leisure-time back on the ship, the skiffs whisk us away again to **Jieng Island**. Weaving our way through a small plantation of fiery-hot red chillies, our guide stops for



a cheerful conversation with a group of chilli-pickers, each protected from the sun by a conical hat, or *nón lá*.

In the shady **village**, we've invited into the home of a charming elderly couple who play for us on traditional instruments and sing us stirring songs through a traditional karaoke microphone. After post-concert refreshments of tea and fruit, the festivities culminate in the most thrilling **lion dance** I've seen anywhere. Who'd expect such a virtuosic performance from a small and remote island village?

DAY TWO: As we're approaching the Cambodian border, it's just one longer excursion today. Skimming by skiff along the wide **Bassac River**, which we're told runs parallel to the Mekong, we head for the bustling river town of **Chau Doc** and a hectic **dry market** where (like the song goes) you've got to have eyes in your feet. From there, small buses take us to **Sam Mountain** – barely a hill, really – and a Mahayana Buddhist temple with rice-paddy views.

For me, though, the highlight comes later. Back on the skiff, we putter among a clutch of **market boats** loaded with watermelons and other fruit, complete with the families that call these boats home. Friendly and engaging, they seem only too happy to be photographed: even the mother who's trimming her toddler's hair while Dad swings nearby in a shady hammock.

Our 45-minute skiff-ride back to the ship along the Bassac is an absorbing 20 kilometres of floating fish-farm houses, and precariously stilted riverbank houses; massive rice warehouses; traditional Chinese-style fishing nets; and of course boats, boats and more boats, from one-man net-fishing canoes to large commercial barges laden to the gunnels with dredged Mekong sand or rice bran, or piled high with gleaming white salt.

DAY THREE: This morning, tuk tuks ferry us around the pretty "silk island" of **Koh Oknha Tey**, and to a dedicated silk village where you can witness the process of silk-making, from the money-making end of the humble



worm, through spinning, weaving and dyeing, to the predictable purchasing of a gorgeous Khmer scarf.

Our afternoon trip is to the island of Preah Prosop, dotted with white Brahman cattle and dominated by a startlingly colourful **Khmer Buddhist temple**. The real highlight here is a visit to the **primary school** on the temple grounds. After displaying their prowess with the English alphabet, the children are palpably excited to receive our guide's gifts of stationery, donated by passengers from the previous cruise; our own contribution will be distributed among them on the next one.

DAY FOUR: After cruising into the faded Art Deco splendour of **Phnom Penh** on the final day, you can choose to visit some of the city's architectural and cultural highlights: options include the 1866 **Royal Palace** and its Silver Pagoda, the chilling but ultimately worthwhile **Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum** and more. This time, though we opt for the **Foreign Correspondents' Club** – possibly the best way to relax for a couple of hours in 38°C summer heat. From there, it's a swift tuk-tuk ride back to the sublime *Aqua Explorer* and a silky-smooth transfer to the airport and then home to Singapore.



How to spend three hours in HCMC:

You could hail a taxi – or a tuk-tuk, if you're brave – to ferry you around the main city sights. Otherwise, ask the concierge for a map and set out on foot.

If you're in the mood for cheap market shopping, it's best to get a lift to **Cho Ben Thanh**, where you can buy almost anything and also get stuck into some great local food – as long as you're prepared to sit on those impossibly low plastic stools.

For retail therapy of a different kind, turn left from the hotel entrance down the pleasantly touristy **Dong Khoi** to find **Liberty Silk**: recently relocated to number 28 on the other side of the road, it's one of the better purveyors of silk garments, including the traditional *ao dai*, for which you shouldn't have to pay more than US\$100 or so. Don't bargain too hard; I regret walking away from a polka-dotted number that was a perfect fit.

Turn right at the end of Dong Khoi to gaze up at the historic **Majestic Hotel**; its rooftop bar has a fine view of the river, but the hotel is government-run and so only nominally five-star. Rooftop bars are big in HCMC, incidentally. Another famous one is at the refurbished **Rex Hotel**; our favourite is the Caravelle's own ninth-floor **Saigon Saigon roof bar**, famous as the spot where war correspondents hung out in the sixties and seventies to slake their thirsts and file their reports. From there, preferably over a beer, you can gaze out over Lam Son Square and the nicely intact **Opera House**.

On our April 2015 visit, the large square opposite the Opera House, previously a public garden, is a building site for a new **underground train system**. It's estimated to cost 2.5 billion US dollars, with help from Japan – Vietnam's third-biggest investor after South Korea and Singapore, we're told. **ca**

Getting there:

It's worth the early start to catch the 7am two-hour Jetstar flight to Ho Chi Min City (HCMC), if only to enjoy three or four hours visiting or revisiting this charming city centre. Aqua Expeditions has teamed up with our favourite hotel, the Caravelle Saigon, making its Café l'Opéra the meeting point for passengers about to embark on the *Aqua Explorer's* four-day or seven-day upriver cruises to Phnom Penh. After a rather creaky visa-on-arrival performance at the airport, the complimentary hotel limousine got us to the Caravelle around 9.30am local time; Vietnam is an hour behind Singapore.

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