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# Moonlight on the Mekong

WORDS BY **GILLIAN MCLAREN**

*AQUA MEKONG*, AQUA EXPEDITIONS

Melting snow on the highlands of Tibet is the source of the Mekong River that pours through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, then Cambodia and Vietnam, where it spills into the South China Sea. Explore this exotic region from Saigon in Vietnam to Siem Reap in Cambodia from aboard the intimate *Aqua Mekong* cruise ship.

From the moment you board the *Aqua Mekong*, you are welcomed and pampered by professional, caring staff. You are sure to have a “Wow” response to the spacious cabin that is to be your home and base while getting to know the mighty Mekong River and surrounding delta. Journey to thriving cities, agrarian villages with Chinese-style pagodas and Buddhist temples, floating villages such as Kompong Luong and busy floating markets, in satisfying luxury.

More than just a cruise ship, the *Aqua Mekong* is a floating five-star boutique hotel, with only 20 cabins and a generous staff to guest ratio. From your king-sized bed, resplendent with crisp white linen, enjoy gazing at the water of this fascinating working river, the variety of vessels that use her for transport and the tropical vegetation of her banks.

Choose a cabin with a balcony - housing a day bed and table with chairs - so you can be outside to watch the sand dredgers as they haul sand to be exported, sea-going ships, container vessels and fishing boats of many kinds. Spot coconuts or water hyacinth drifting past, brahmyny kites plunging kamikaze-style into the water to catch a fish, pied kingfishers on the branches of tropical

trees, and a white-bellied sea eagle soaring above the wake.

Your bathroom has twin basins, a strong shower, soft white towels, a large window with permanent shutters, as well as a charming porthole with one-way glass, to peep out at villages with bamboo homes on stilts, or gentle sunsets reflected in the waves. Unpacking your clothes into an ample wardrobe is so civilized, compared to living out of a suitcase. Each morning your laundry is whisked away and appears clean and folded in the evening. After each excursion staff graciously take your shoes and clean them for you.

Your preferences are all carefully noted and remembered. This is service excellence that is discreet and sensitive, never intrusive. You are free to enjoy meals on your own or to join guests you have befriended, in the dining room with a view, situated aft. Styled by Consultant Chef David Thompson, gourmet Asian and Western food is unfailingly delicious and prettily presented. One night a feast is offered on the foredeck, alongside the infinity swimming pool, when you can get to know fellow passengers and the hosts of the cruise. Antony Zoupas, one such host, is so enthusiastic and obliging that he shares his great photographs

with guests and even does some shopping for a lady who wishes to remain on board.

It is not easy to leave the comfort and elegance of *Aqua Mekong*, but try not to miss too many of the on- and offshore excursions. Four private tenders motor to selected remote villages where you learn about crafts that have been practised there for millennia. It is possible to buy wares ranging from silverware to pottery, silk garments, stoneware and carvings. In each village local people demonstrate how the items are made. Few tourists get to visit these authentic working villages to see the keen pupils in the little schools, receive blessings from a monk in the local temple, bicycle on simple tracks to the music of sweet hellos from smiling children, or taste delectable fruit shared by generous families. This is a photographer's nirvana, so make sure to pack a camera or two.

Excursions in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, are particularly interesting, but heart-breaking. Both The Killing Fields and the Genocide Museum require courage to take in. They are memorable, sobering and help one to understand the torrid history of this nation. Our first-class guide tells of the







impact of the tyrannical regime of the Khmer Rouge and how it affected the whole country, including his own family.

Arriving back after excursions you are met by staff with iced and scented hand-towels, then escorted to one of the lounge areas for a specially concocted drink. Free until lunchtime, you may do as you please. Some enjoy resting in their cabin or browsing in the library. Others watch a movie in the ship's theatre or exercise in the onboard gym. A favourite pursuit is lying on sun-loungers to survey the passing scene, sipping a Bombay Sapphire gin and tonic with a slice of lime.

Romantic sunsets viewed from your cabin, twin massages in the onboard Spa, delectable food styled by the Michelin-starred chef and intriguing excursions - an *Aqua Mekong* cruise will be an exceptional start to your married life. You will never forget the reflection of the moon broken into shards of light by the gently flowing south-east Asian Mekong River. ♦

### Cathay Pacific

In Premier Economy Class, a cut above the usual economy class, I appreciated a wider seat, plenty of leg room, quality food served with steel cutlery and dedicated cabin crew.

[www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com)

011 064 1100;

email: [jnb\\_fares@cathaypacific.com](mailto:jnb_fares@cathaypacific.com)

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[www.ABOUTAsiatravel.com](http://www.ABOUTAsiatravel.com)

### Recommended hotels in Cambodia

**In Phnom Penh:** The Plantation Urban Resort, a colonial, style hotel situated behind the Royal Palace in the historical centre of this vibrant city, features a long swimming pool surrounded by

palm trees. [www.theplantation.asia](http://www.theplantation.asia)

**In Kep:** Knai Bang Chat on the seafront of the Gulf of Thailand, near the bustling crab market, has bold modern architecture with an infinity pool and excellent restaurant. [www.knaibangchatt.com](http://www.knaibangchatt.com)

**In Siem Riep:** Amansara - Aman Resorts. Find Zen perfection with immaculate suites, gourmet food and a sublime Spa.

[www.amanresorts.com/amansara/](http://www.amanresorts.com/amansara/)

Shinta ManiClub is set in a quiet, verdant area, yet near the Old Market and bustling bars and restaurants. This tranquil boutique hotel offers a warm welcome to chic minimalistic rooms, looking down onto a feng shui space with a swimming pool.

[www.shintamani.com/club/](http://www.shintamani.com/club/)

