

Mekong Journey



For many years now we have been asked by intrepid travellers whether it is possible to follow the course of the mighty Mekong River through Indochina from the fertile delta region in Vietnam, via Cambodia to the mountains of northern Laos. "Possible yes" was always our response "but rough and rugged en route".



Hotel accommodation on the banks of the Mekong was very basic and transportation along the river usually in its most primitive form. Recently, with the opening of several new hotels and boat services, we felt it was time to re-assess the situation and concluded that the course of the Mekong could now be traversed in relative luxury. Yes, a few flights were needed to cross national borders, and, yes, certain sections were best overlooked for practical reasons, but certainly the journey is now possible without having to compromise on comfort.

We sent our Indochina specialist, Peter Stanley-Jones, on an exploratory

trip up the Mekong to discover for himself the options available for Audley Travellers. The trip is available as a complete tour, or why not choose the sections that interest you most.

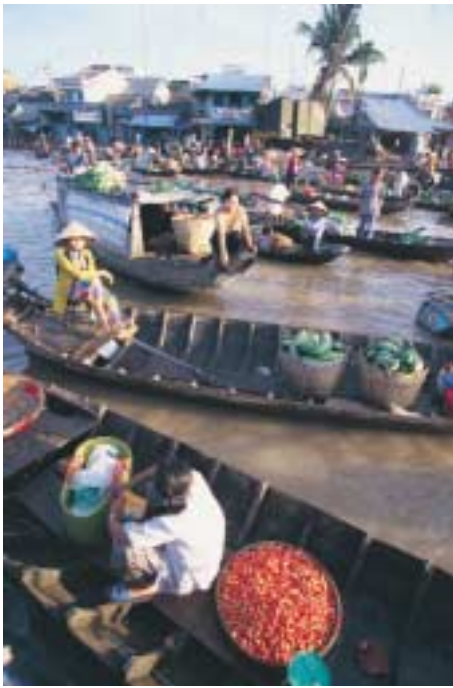
Day 1. Leaving Saigon, my guide and I travelled south along Highway One into the lush delta scenery. It was as we arrived at the delightful Victoria Hotel in Can Tho that I got my first awe-inspiring view of the mighty Mekong River. It stretched, almost inconceivably, further than the eye could see. Suddenly the Thames seemed rather puny by comparison. I dined in the hotel's wonderful restaurant with the manager who

was intrigued to hear about my forthcoming journey.

Day 2. At the crack of dawn I boarded the "Lady Hau" junk for a delicious buffet breakfast while cruising to the Cai Rang floating market. The market is a thrilling place to be at this time of day, bustling with boats who tout aloft their wares on bamboo poles for potential customers to see.

I continued upriver towards the Cambodia border via the egret sanctuary at Thot Not and arrived at the Victoria Hotel in Chau Doc in time to witness the sun setting over the delta from nearby Sam Mountain.

Day 3. Victoria Hotels have a deliberate policy of building properties in



CAI RANG FLOATING MARKET



ANGKOR

remote but interesting places in an architectural style designed to blend in with the cultural and natural surroundings. Chau Doc is no exception and is my favourite of all the Victoria properties. My boat left from the jetty early in the morning passing by the floating fish farms and busy market. We crossed the border into Cambodia and arrived at Phnom Penh by midday. Having an afternoon to play with, I embarked on a whirlwind tour of the city including the Royal Palace, the National Museum and the harrowing Tuol Sleng, a school converted to a torture and detention centre during Pol Pot's barbaric regime.

Day 4. Another early start saw me head upriver on the new Mekong Express fast-boat service. Airline style chairs and waitress service are a far cry from the overcrowded vessels which were used until recently to whisk you across Tonle Sap Lake to Siem Reap. The late afternoon saw a dream fulfilled as I watched the sunset over Angkor Wat. Truly one of the most inspiring and majestic religious monuments in the world.

Day 5. A full day exploring temples beckoned. One could easily spend a week here and not visit the same temple twice. However, with time being at a premium I selected only a few gems recommended by my colleagues. Banteay Samre's amazing bas reliefs, the serene carved faces of the Bayon and the overgrown root-covered remains of Ta Phrom were the highlights for me.

Day 6. After flying from Siem Reap to



VICTORIA HOTEL, CHAU DOC

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the Laotian town of Pakse, I eagerly joined my Mekong cruise on a lavishly restored rice-barge. The first stop was Champassak and the tenth century, pre-Angkorian Wat Phou temple, arguably the birthplace of Khmer culture. After our visit we dined aboard the twelve cabined rice-barge with its expansive, polished open decks offering an all round view as the world goes by. As I sat sipping a gin and tonic watching the sun go down I decided that this is really the only way to travel in style along the Mekong in southern Laos.

Days 7 - 8. It was while cruising through the wilderness country known as the "4000 islands" that to my great delight we spotted a pod of freshwater dolphins. Although there

are fair numbers in this part of the river they are shyer than their saltwater cousins so a sharp lookout was in order. The final night of my southern Laos journey saw me in my Pakse hotel pining for my little wooden cabin and the charms of sleeping afloat!

Days 9-11. I next flew to Luang Prabang for a two night stay. Whilst in this enchanting town I observed saffron-robed monks collecting alms in the morning gloom. I then boarded the "Pak Ou" cruiser, an elegant wooden boat operated exclusively by the Luangsay Lodge, which allows passengers to travel to Thailand through the remote mountain wilderness of northern Laos. The bungalows of the Luangsay Lodge were a welcome sight as they hove into view late in the afternoon. After a simple dinner I was captivated by the fireflies dancing in front of my balcony.

The end of a second day on the Pac Ou saw me sitting on the veranda at Thailand's renowned Baan Boran hotel in the Golden Triangle overlooking the Mekong. Exhausted, but content at the end of my journey I gazed over river at the Laotian and Burmese borders and thought, "not a bad little river really".

Travel File

If you are inspired to journey along the Mekong, a 14 night trip following a similar itinerary to Peter would cost from £2,295 per person, inclusive of international flights.

Call our Indochina specialists on 01869 276 200 for further details.