

# Asia Afloat

*Southeast Asia's traditional waterborne ways of life still go on as they have for centuries, so what better way to watch the world go by than from the deck of a boat?*



Monkey bridge, Mekong Delta



Canoe on the Sepik River



Mekong scene, Southern Vietnam

## FACT FILE

All of these boat trips, and many more, can be incorporated into any Southeast Asia itinerary. Please contact our specialists on 01993 838 100 for details.



## The Mekong River, Indochina

I have tried a number of boats that enable one to enjoy the Mekong, its scenery and the people that inhabit its banks. In Northern Thailand I boarded the Luang Say for a cruise to Luang Prabang in Laos, during which time I met hill tribes, explored cave temples and soaked up the glorious mountain views and virgin rainforests, staying overnight at an eco-lodge on the banks of the Mekong before journeying on to the UNESCO world heritage town of Luang Prabang.

In Southern Laos, the best way to explore the Mekong and the 4,000 islands is on-board a stylish renovated rice barge named after Wat Phou. You have an air-conditioned cabin and during the days I took the opportunity to visit the ancient Khmer temple of Wat Phou and the old colonial islands of Don Khong and Don Khone, as well as spotting the rare Irrawaddy dolphins. Finally, the RV Pandaw runs from the temples of Angkor at Siem Reap, across the Tonle Sap Lake, then down the Mekong through Phnom Penh on to Vietnam, the Delta and Saigon. The trip takes one week and is a most sedate and luxurious way of seeing Cambodia and Southern Vietnam.

**Charlie Read:** 01993 838 121

## The Sepik River, Papua New Guinea

The steps carved into the Sepik riverbank squelched ominously as I made my way aboard. I was grateful of a helping hand from the village chief and nervous for my pride as mischievous children looked on waiting for someone to slip. The Sepik people live a fragile existence dictated by the river, their ancient customs based around the power of the water. After a day visiting their stilted homes, tasting sago pancakes (which I cannot recommend!) and stoking the smoking kilns for the arrival of the day's catch, I looked forward to a cold beer back on deck.

I loved the sense of isolated tranquility on Papua New Guinea's greatest waterway, enhanced by the vast, untouched surrounding rainforest. As our ten-room floating hotel crept past civilisations unchanged for generations, fishermen waved from dugout canoes and fish eagles swooped, the peace only momentarily broken by the four-metre crocodile eyeing us from the mudflats.

**Vanessa Coleridge:** 01993 838 117



Komodo dragon



The Sepik Spirit

**Chao Phraya River, Thailand**

The waterways of Thailand provide a comfortable way of accessing the country's more remote regions. Leaving the bustling city of Bangkok behind, the Manohra Song - a luxury riverboat built upon the original century-old teak hull of a rice barge - explores the Chao Phraya River en route to the ancient capital of Ayuthaya on a delightful two-night voyage. With only four air-conditioned en suite berths the atmosphere is peaceful and relaxed. Fantastic food was prepared freshly throughout the day, so I was grateful for the chance to stretch my legs and explore the remarkable temples at Ayuthaya and the Summer Palace at Bang Pa-in. Bitten by the boating bug, my next visit to Thailand will take me back to the Andaman Coast to cruise the emerald waters of Phang Nga Bay on-board Suwan Macha, a traditional Siamese junk.

**Kate Dicks:** 01993 838 104

**Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia**

My latest trip to Indonesia was on a cruise to the islands of Nusa Tenggara. The Katharina is a traditional tall ship built to ancient 'Bugis' design with modern luxuries taken care of by the Dutch owner. With seven well-appointed cabins there is

a very personal feel to the boat. This is enhanced by the friendly local crew who serve some of the best food I have tasted incorporating seafood, local spices and tropical fruit. The highlight of the trip was undoubtedly my visit to Rinca Island - one of only three in the world inhabited by Komodo dragons - where I was lucky enough to see about ten dragons, including several large males with sharp claws and tongues flicking ominously towards me.

**Neil Bedford:** 01993 838 113



Dugout canoes, Sepik River



Life on the Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia