

# Globe Life

## Riverboat fantasy

Fat novel and Chivas on the rocks in hand, JEREMY FERGUSON embarks on a Mekong voyage through Vietnam and Cambodia, from the watery ribbons of the River of Nine Dragons to the mighty temple ruins of Angkor

JEREMY FERGUSON

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*"Pinch me, Rosie. Here we are going down the river like Anthony and Cleopatra on that barge."*

-- Humphrey Bogart to Katharine Hepburn in *The African Queen*

There's a magic about river-cruising, wherever the river, whatever the boat. It has to do with an easy, unruffled rhythm deeply out of whack with computer chips, jumbo jets, *jihads* and anxiety attacks. A river or two, and you're hooked. Charlie Allnut, the gin-soaked river rat played by Bogart in *The African Queen*, understood this romance, and so became one of the great, unlikely charmers in screen history.

A riverboat junkie, I've cruised the Nile, Yangtze, Amazon, Danube, Mississippi and Irrawaddy. And now I am to test the waters of the Mekong on a river journey that takes me through Vietnam and Cambodia, from the watery ribbons of the Mekong Delta to the ruins of mighty Angkor at Siem Reap.

Among the world's rivers, the Mekong is siren: It flows out of China, snaking its way through Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam on its way to the South China Sea. Marco Polo saw it in the 13th century, possibly the first Westerner to be mesmerized by this ribbon of water that sustains and reveals life in Southeast Asia.

Today, however, travellers can ride the river in a way Polo never could. With one authentically replicated steamer already plying its namesake river, the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company last year started cruising the Mekong.

It was an unexpectedly turbulent ride. Dealing with two governments -- Vietnamese and Cambodian -- turned into a Byzantine misadventure for the Scottish company. At one point, Vietnamese authorities warned that if the company's boat moored anywhere on

their shores, it would be impounded and the captain thrown in jail.

The problems appear to have been ironed out. This season, cruising under the Cambodian flag, two boats -- the 64-passenger RV Mekong Pandaw and 66-passenger RV Tonlé Pandaw -- are voyaging the Mekong.

Their common assets include teak decks and floors, handsome public lounges, an open-air roof lounge with deck chairs, a restaurant, and air-conditioned cabins outfitted with spacious showers and comfortable captain's beds. The warm and welcoming staff is Burmese, Cambodian and Vietnamese. Although moderately priced, the boats have drawn such luminaries as travel industry magnate George Butterfield and film director Sidney Pollack.

My wife Carol and I exorcize our initial jet leg with three nights in Saigon. Anyone whose notion of Vietnam comes from *Apocalypse Now* is in for a shock. This is Paris with palms, a city of broad boulevards, gorgeous 19th-century buildings -- the Post Office, where letter-writers sell their talents to the illiterate, must be seen -- and the grandiose remnants of Indochina, the French empire that encompassed modern Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

We bus two hours south to a grotty landing at the town of Pho Doc to board the Mekong Pandaw, our floating hotel for a week. We spend three days on the Mekong Delta, known as the "River of Nine Dragons" because the waterway forks into nine branches as it greets the South China Sea.

The delta is a journey into canals, lagoons, water villages, floating markets, temples and pagodas. Life swirls around us. There is nary a moment's pause.

At Can Tho, in a purple dawn, we clamber into canoes to peruse the largest floating market in Southeast Asia. What traffic there is: Tiny women helming a sea of sampans; fruits and fishes piled high on weathered decks; fruit boats loaded with papayas the size of footballs; a boat offering only *pho*, the beloved beef noodle soup of the Vietnamese; a floating convenience store.

Back aboard the Pandaw, on the breezy upper deck, life on the Mekong is sweet. A beautiful Cambodian woman named Any serves complimentary teas ranging from green to jasmine.

A fat novel, deck chair and Chivas on the rocks are never more at home than on a riverboat. We mingle with our fellow passengers: Brits, Australians, New Zealanders, French, Germans, Swiss. The rhythm of the river lulls us into napping. At dusk, the air fills with the scent of five-spice, and the kitchen follows with sea bass crusted in lemongrass. A full moon hangs in the Southeast Asian sky like a ripe tangerine.

At the Cambodian border the red tape is maddening, taking more than five hours as paperwork is exchanged, passports stamped and most importantly, Cambodian officials wined and dined.

We pass through, and cruise on past Phnom Penh to the Upper Mekong. The river turns as green and broad as the Amazon. Sandbars appear like wind-coiffed shards of desert in the stream. Temple spires glimmer against a Kodachrome sky. Water buffalo immerse themselves up to their necks. Fishermen net dinner from the backs of long-tailed canoes. Villagers stare at us like some phantom anachronism sweeping through their backyards.

Kampong Cham, south of the thundering falls that prevent navigation northwards into Laos, is the end of the line. When the shore offers no access, the crew does what Pandaw crews do: They jump out and dig a staircase into the muddy banks. Our destination is a hill temple. The itinerary says the distance is one hour, and so it is: 15 minutes by bus and 45 minutes wheezing up 212 steps in the withering sun. The payoff is not so much a great panoramic view or stunning temple (it is in fact quite ordinary), but surviving the climb.

Turning southwards, we moor for a day at Phnom Penh. At last the Cambodian capital is returning from the dead, the 20th-century trauma of the Pol Pot regime gradually fading. Neoclassical French buildings are being restored. Temples, after wholesale destruction by the Khmer Rouge, are thriving again. Phnom Penh never rests, yet there is a laid-back quality to it, as if the inhabitants are happy to have survived and are in no big hurry.

At Phnom Penh, the Pandaw switches to the Tonlé River. We enter a realm of floating villages, and moor at the mouth of Tonle Lake. The torpid day ends with a Mekong sunset that deepens from gold to crimson in vast swatches of cloud, a red dusk that darkens into an indigo sky studded with fat diamonds.

Next morning, because the water level is too low to accommodate the Pandaw, we disembark and transfer to speedboats for the final lap to Siem Reap and the archeological grandeur of Angkor, which will mark the end of our Mekong journey.

The capital of a Hindu empire that sprawled across Southeast Asia, Angkor ranks alongside Egypt's Pyramids and the archeology of Greece and Rome in scope and impact. The best preserved of the 100 temples -- and the largest religious building in the world -- is Angkor Wat.

Right off the bat, Angkor Wat extinguishes any doubts that this massive complex can't possibly live up to our inflated expectations. It's simply eye-popping, especially, as the tourist hordes attest, at sunrise, when its walls and towers stand silhouetted under a

sky the colour of peaches.

But even though Angkor Wat claims most of the tourists most of the time, it isn't necessarily the best of the temples. I'd point instead to Bayon, where 216 giant, enigmatic stone faces peer down at insufficient mortals from 54 stone towers. No one ever forgets these images of Angkor. In late afternoon, dappled with sunlight and framed in emerald foliage, Bayon must be as fully magnificent as it was a thousand years ago.

Another favourite is Ta Prohm, which seems as deeply engulfed in jungle as it was when European explorers stumbled across it in the 19th century. It is like something out of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* -- all crumbling towers and corridors, gnarled tendrils wrapped around tumbled stone, huge root systems snaking over shrines, carvings turned green with moss and lichen, sunshine streaking in through towering banyan trees.

Between bouts of temple-climbing and philosophizing, we find creature comforts in the amiable boomtown of Siem Reap. We lunch at the Red Piano, Angelina Jolie's *Tomb Raider* hang-out, on some of the best *frites* in Southeast Asia.

For dinner, we catch a tuk-tuk to Madame Butterfly, a Cambodian manse where a breeze blows gently across the terraces at dusk. We sit down to French wine, crisp spring rolls, salads roaring with spices and curries turned to silk with infusions of coconut milk.

It seems a fitting moment to salute this beautiful land, these descendents of the ancient Khmers and the river that brought us here, and wish them peace for the next thousand years.

## **Pack your bags**

### **GETTING THERE**

**Cox & Kings Travel:** 1-800-999-1758; <http://www.coxandkingsusa.com>. Arranges both Mekong cruises and custom tours of Vietnam and Cambodia.

Tourist visas are required for both Vietnam and Cambodia. For more information on obtaining a Vietnamese visa, call the Embassy of Vietnam at (613) 232-1957. The price for the 30-day visa is \$60. There is no Cambodian embassy in Canada, but tourist visas are available on arrival at Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. The price is \$25. You'll need your passport and two photos.

### **CRUISES**

**The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company:** <http://www.pandaw.com>; 34 (972) 583 346.

Seven-night/eight-day Mekong cruises aboard the RV Mekong Pandaw and RV Tonle Pandaw start at \$970 (double occupancy). Price includes main meals, non-alcoholic beverages, sightseeing during the cruise, transfers between the dock and Saigon and English-speaking guide.

### **MORE INFORMATION**

**Tourism of Cambodia:** 855 (23) 216 666; <http://www.tourismcambodia.com>.

**Vietnam National Administration of Tourism:** <http://www.vietnamtourism.com>;  
84 (4) 942 1061.

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