

# TRAVEL

& INDULGENCE

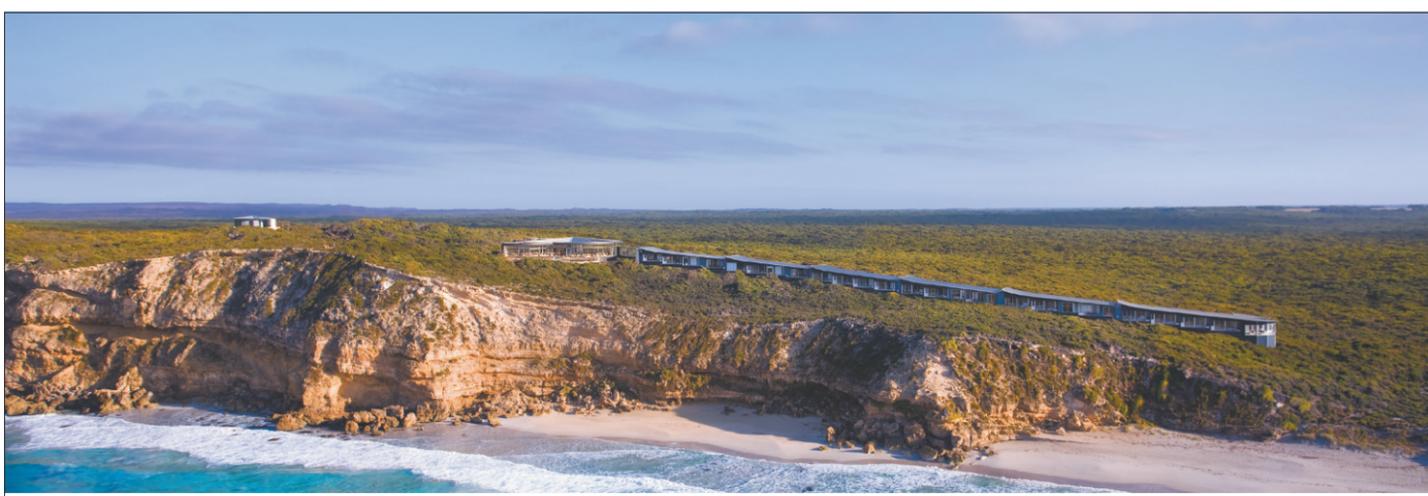
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# Full streams ahead



SUSAN KUROSAWA

River roving is now the 21st-century version of coach touring, without the packing and unpacking

River cruising in Asia is going gangbusters ... from the Yangtze to the Mekong, the Ganges to the Ayeyarwady, there is abundant choice and fearsome competition. Many cruise-loving tourists have done the Danube, roamed the Rhine, sidled along the Seine, and ventured onto all the well-known European waterways. To cope with the push, the Douro River in Portugal has become one of the latest playgrounds and Avalon Waterways has just announced the Meuse River in Belgium as a new focus in its 2016 itineraries. In due course, insatiable cruise buffs will no doubt set their sights on the Amazon. The Mississippi looks nice. Meantime, Asia is the new Europe. Keeping up?

It is plain as day why river roving is so popular. It is the 21st-century version of coach touring, without the packing and unpacking, the highway hotels and the whistle-stop tours. Days are structured and, if you opt not to go on all the shore excursions (typically, two a day), as leisurely as you please. Overall passenger numbers for river voyages are up at least 25 per cent since 2012 and the big players are adding a breathtaking number of new and upgraded vessels to their Europe-based fleets. The number of ships being launched each year is more than double that of ocean liners. Although the latter are, of course, much bigger and take longer to build, this figure is a good indicator of the voracious demand.

Many parts of Asia, such as the inland reaches of Myanmar and the Mekong Delta, are difficult to access,

in terms of transport and appropriate levels of comfort, so a river cruise makes logistical sense. In pre-monsoonal heat, such places would only be tackled by the most adventurous of travellers, but with an air-conditioned floating hotel, everything seems achievable. Passengers are invisibly tied to their chosen ship by virtue of a safety net of good tour guides, ground support staff and the knowledge that excursions have been organised to make the most of time spent at each stop. The river ships have spas and gyms, cocktail bars and luxury lounges; all is cool, hygienic and ultra-organised. Like the cruise ship counterparts, fares include meals, selected drinks, tours, transfers and many extras.

But lest this sound too safe and sanitised, Asian river cruising is, from my two experiences, enormous fun and most convivial. I cruised aboard Belmond's Orcaella on the Ayeyarwady from Bagan to Yangon in late 2013 and rate it as one of my best experiences afloat. Last month, I boarded Aqua Mekong, from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City, for a sampler voyage on Aqua Mekong. What I soon discovered, on both cruises, is that Asian itineraries are not nearly as sedentary as their Europe equivalents. Be prepared for rickshaws, tuk-tuks, bullock wagons, local shallow-draft boats to weave you through floating markets, spirited bargaining, yummy street food and markets where the energy and industriousness all but rises in great puffs of steam. Then back to base camp for that cool lemongrass martini.

FOLLOW THE READER

## A haunting Gallipoli moment

MEREDYTH CILENTO  
WILLUNGA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

It is often people you meet fleetingly when you travel who take up permanent residence in your memory. The unknown elderly Turkish lady, head swathed in a soft pink floral scarf, was such a one.

Twenty years ago, at a time before enthusiastic throngs were heading to Gallipoli to remember the Anzac landing, I wandered around Lone Pine Cemetery.

Small markers, melancholy reminders of so many lost lives, were uniformly engraved with understated simplicity: a cross, a name, a date of death, an age, and a succinct and poignant message from the soldier's family. Tributes such as: "A clean straight life nobly ended", "Our lovely boy, gone but always remembered" and, to commemorate John Simpson Kirkpatrick (who spent the three weeks he was on the peninsula as a member of the medical corps tirelessly evacuating the wounded on his donkey, before being shot in the head by a sniper early one morning), "He gave his life that others may live".

The silence was profound. So different from the nightmarish sounds of war — the constant gunfire, the ex-

plosions of hand grenades, the encouraging cries of comrades, the screams of the injured, the moans of the dying. And yet the echoes in the air made the hairs on the back of my neck rise and my eyes prickle. There was a small, unprepossessing museum in those days of several intimate-sized rooms crammed with evocative reminders in glass cases: rusted shaving equipment, a water flask pierced by a bullet, a torn envelope from which spilled a handwritten letter and a photo of a baby, a battered pocket watch, hands fixed forever at 20 past four. It was here that the Turkish lady approached me. Plump, bespectacled and short, she wore her multicoloured traditional pantaloons bunched at the ankle, and a navy jacket covered in star-like spots.

Without a word, she reached forward and clasped my hands in both of hers. Neither of us could speak the other's language, and yet we communicated our deep, perhaps maternal, universal sadness at the futility of war and the loss of young men's lives. We hugged each other and parted. She was the embodiment of Atatürk's famous words written in 1934: "You mothers, who sent your sons from faraway countries, wipe away your tears: your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well."

RANT OR RAVE

Send your 400-word contribution to Follow the Reader: [travel@theaustralian.com.au](mailto:travel@theaustralian.com.au). Columnists receive a Paula's Choice Resist Essential Kit with four skincare items, including cleanser and nourishing creams suitable for all skin types (\$119.85). More: [paulaschoice.com.au](http://paulaschoice.com.au).



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A LITTLE FLIGHT READING

LONDON STYLE GUIDE  
Saska Graville  
(Murdoch Books, \$39.99)

All savvy travellers want to know how to lift the lid on a big city's best-kept secrets and the Style Guide series of prettily presented hardback titles is a good start. Saska Graville's new London title is an update of the 2012 original and contains loads more non-touristy places, including hotels. In her 24-hour wishlist summary, Graville nominates Dean Street Townhouse in Soho as a favourite place to stay; the 39-room hotel is spread across two Georgian townhouses and has accommodation styles that range from Broom Cupboard to Bigger, although the author claims the former category is "gorgeous". The book is divided into must-visit "villages", from Bermondsey to Bloomsbury, Notting Hill to Noho (north of Soho), there are lovely pictures aplenty and 18



Meet the Londoner grabs with city insiders, such as developer Harry Handelsman, driving force behind the conversion of the 19th-century Midland Grand Hotel to St Pancras Renaissance, astride the Eurostar railway station. If you are bound for the French capital, an equally agreeable companion would be Paris Style Guide (\$39.99) by Elodie Rambaud, a freelance stylist who has opened up her address book, covering flea markets, tucked-away parks and gardens, specialty boutiques, cafes, restaurants, bars and arty lodgings such as Hotel du Temps in the 9th arrondissement, which she describes as "a little jewel, fresh and bright, full of colour and patterns".

SUSAN KUROSAWA

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OPEN BOOK

'The children ran out to the road and climbed into the bus. Fern took no notice of the others in the bus. She just sat and stared out of the window, thinking what a blissful world it was and how lucky she was to have entire charge of a pig. By the time the bus reached school, Fern had named her pet, selecting the most beautiful name she could think of. 'Its name is Wilbur,' she whispered to herself. She was still thinking about the pig when the teacher said: 'Fern, what is the capital of Pennsylvania?' 'Wilbur,' said Fern, dreamily. The pupils giggled. Fern blushed.'

EB WHITE CHARLOTTE'S WEB (1952)

WHAT IN THE WORLD

It was an egg mayonnaise sandwich in both directions when T&I flew Virgin Australia between Sydney and Melbourne last weekend but, nonetheless, the provision of complimentary food across the domestic network, plus the addition of no-charge checked baggage and inflight entertainment, elevates the carrier to full-service status • Royal Caribbean Line's 5000-passenger Ovation of the Seas will be based in Australian waters during summer 2016-17; the megaliner features a restaurant by Jamie Oliver and unique features including a bumper car circuit, aerial observatory and a Bionic Bar for robot-served cocktails • Air New Zealand has announced direct 777-200 flights from Auckland to Houston from December; it will also commence Buenos Aires services in November • Luke Nguyen's *United Kingdom* debuts on SBS One on May 14 at 8pm; the 10 half-hour episodes cover a plethora of dishes, from seafood in Cornwall to haggis to Scotland.

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# Marvels of the Mekong

Fifty shades of green, from Cambodia to Vietnam

SUSAN KUROSAWA

In the industry, it's known as a sampler cruise — just a quick reconnaissance of a river and region, intended to whet passengers' appetites for more. Sometimes the samplers are repositioning voyages, designed to pop the vessel into a different base port from which to operate the next season of sailings. In my case, it is three days aboard Aqua Mekong, southeast from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City, billed as a "discovery cruise". It seems a disappointingly short amount of time when there are seven and four-night options on offer. I feel panicked that I will underachieve. How to relax? Will I digest the fine and abiding distinctions of Khmer and Vietnamese cultures? There'll be barely time to sleep.

Such short voyages typically form the centrepiece of broader explorations and this is how our small group decides we must approach our capsule taste of the Mekong. In Cambodia, we have roamed Siem Reap, explored Angkor Wat, strolled and all but shopped-out Phnom Penh. When we reach Ho Chi Minh City, there will be hectic city tours and thrilling Vespa rides and then it's off to Vietnam's central coast and high and rocky inland parks. This river and delta interlude will be the thread that connects the two countries, that gives us opportunity to absorb and reflect, and to appreciate the importance of the life-giving waters and flourishing agricultural communities of the Mekong.

Aqua Mekong is more floating boutique hotel than conventional river cruiser. Even its blocky glass-walled profile is more suggestive of a building than a boat. The interior design is streamlined and spare, all glossy timbers, chocolatey colours and clever designer details. There are tall arrangements of bright flowers, such as spiral ginger and birds of paradise, and textured rugs and cushions. The 20 suites, ranged across two decks, are a spacious 30sq m and come with either a balcony or indoor daybed nook; from either configuration, the river vistas are immediate, absorbing and dazzling, starting

We Aqua Mekong cruisers agree the food aboard our vessel is so varied and delicious that it is vital to be hungry each mealtime



slowly with pale pink sunrises and climaxing with showy orange sunsets.

With a one-to-one staff-to-guest ratio and a maximum of 40 passengers, there is a clubby and chummy feel on board but plenty of tables for two in the dining room if you are not the partying kind. On our cruise, it's a mix of Australian, American and Brazilian passengers; we mingle over pre-dinner cocktails, chat after the evening tour briefings in the main lounge but then drift in different directions. A small pool at the front of the observation deck, covered by a shade sail, is just the shot for an early-morning dip and I have only small, swooping birds for company. On the final evening our group takes over the cinema to watch *Good Morning, Vietnam*. The two Cambodian barmen, Nary and Koemnich, make regular checks to ensure the moviegoers' pisco sour cocktails and Mekong coladas (with twirly straws and pineapple garnish) are topped up.

Shore excursions are aboard "skiffs", which are not the insubstantial craft such a name could imply but open-sided motorised boats with covered roofs. We zoom along the river proper and navigate channels threaded with water hyacinth, its attractive purple flowers belying

its status as an invasive, clogging species. We zip through floating markets and pass close to high-prowed fishing boats with painted eyes, which Vietnamese guide Tuyen says are "to scare monsters in the water". Their decks are hung with laundry and stacked with plastic buckets and everyday utensils.

Everyone returns our waves; soapy washing-up water is suddenly emptied through a low window and just misses the skiff. We note satellite dishes and chaps in singlets and pyjama trousers lazing in deckchairs, cooled by electric fans. Later they will spring into action and load hauls of catfish in wicker baskets up and down rickety planks to and from shore.

The pace of a typical Aqua Mekong day starts with a sturdy breakfast, with pastries such as pain au chocolat owing a nod to the French colonial heritage of this region. Did someone mention ricotta hot cakes with banana and honey? Juices are freshly squeezed; fruit ranges beyond the expected to local delicacies such as mangosteens and water apples.

Morning and afternoon excursions shape the daily schedule and take us to temples and villages, heritage house-museums and, best of all, markets such as the big, busy covered spread at Tan Chau. It's tempting to gorge here on "elephant" mangoes that weigh up to an astonishing 10kg and breadfruit the size of bowling balls. We salivate over spoonfuls of pickled papaya straight from the stirring pot; there's sugarised tamarind, meaty morsels folded into betel leaves, flat cakes made with popped rice and neatly rolled coconut or ginger candies.

But we Aqua Mekong cruisers agree the food aboard our vessel is so varied and delicious that it is vital to be hungry each mealtime, with forks poised and ready. Australian chef David Thompson, a Michelin-starred master of Thai and Southeast Asian cuisine, has designed the menus and this is the best food I have tried aboard any ship, whether on ocean or river.

The style is a blend of spicy Thai, herby Khmer and minty Vietnamese but with Western options in the mix, such as a lunchtime offering of goat's cheese ravioli with burnt butter and pine nuts, and specials based on the catch of the day. Dishes are designed to share, tableware is beautifully decorative, and there's a crunch and texture to the Asian offerings, in particular, that seems almost virtuous. There's river prawn pilaf, pomelo and squid salad, curries humming with chilli and heady with basil, bean curd with spring onions and ginger, sapodillas steeped in coconut cream, and the glorious nursery-sweet creation that is mango and sticky rice.

This short voyage includes two full days of sightseeing



The 20 suites are a spacious 30sq m and come with a balcony or a day bed

AQUA EXPEDITIONS



AQUA EXPEDITIONS



AQUA EXPEDITIONS

Aqua Mekong is more floating boutique hotel than river cruiser, left; the lounge and bar, above; skiffs are used for shore excursions, below; Mekong Delta markets are hives of industry and fresh food, right and below right



AQUA EXPEDITIONS



SUSAN KUROSAWA



SUSAN KUROSAWA

stops and sailing and there are options of cycling as well as skiff rides. We take rickshaws on day one to a Cao Dai temple at Tan Chau, where worshippers pay homage to ancestors amid ceilings and walls painted in fluorescent blues, brass urns and myriad embellishments.

On day two we visit families in the rice-growing settlement of My An Hung and are treated to an "afternoon fruit tea" of "hot and cooling" varieties, including thin-skinned mandarins, guavas, longans and that devilish durian. As we dip slices into bowls of lime-drenched white pepper, long-legged herons fly low over surrounding fish farms. Tuyen shows us "heaven-pointing chillies" and water spinach thriving in the rich, dark soil. From shoulder-high reeds young children suddenly appear in great gusts of laughter, vying with each other to be the first to practise saying "hello" and "welcome". We feel enveloped in 50 shades of green — dense, cooling, luxuriant and life-giving.

Then, as we sit in obedient rows inside a village house, a handsome man in his 60s plucks reedy notes on a one-stringed *dan bau* for us while his wife warbles in a high soprano that scurries small birds from the rafters.

Every time we reboard Aqua Mekong, the spa attend-

ants materialise at the gangway with trays of coconut water and chilled towels scented with jasmine. Our dusty walking shoes are tagged and taken away for cleaning. Most of us head for showers and quick lie-downs, do-not-disturb beads popped onto suite door handles. As we settle back with watermelon crushes enlivened with a blast of barley vodka, a squeeze of lime and a pinch of sea salt, members of an entertainment troupe board and assemble in the main lounge. As they perform barefooted dances with names such as Golden Mermaid, their movements seem weightless and their expressive, slow-moving hands tell of fishing fables and enduring village stories. Costumes glisten and sparkle. We are mesmerised and humbled by such serenity and grace.

By the end of day two, the captain announces that we have sailed 275km downriver from Phnom Penh. It has been far too quick. My Tho, our port for Ho Chi Minh City, is within our sights. Soon we will board a bus racing to Vietnam's energy-packed gateway city. Would I do it again? Oh, yes, in a jiff and a skiff.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Vietnam Airlines, Abercrombie & Kent and Aqua Expeditions.

A handsome man in his 60s plucks reedy notes on a *dan bau* while his wife warbles in a high soprano that scurries small birds

### Checklist

There is a minimum age of seven years for children on board; four pairs of interconnecting suites are suitable for families. Suites on the upper deck are slightly more expensive but hardly worth the extra as all accommodation is of an identical standard. Choose a balcony only if you want fresh air and outdoor lounging (way too hot to enjoy during my March cruise). Upriver and downriver itineraries are for seven, four or three nights. The fare includes all meals, non-alcoholic beverages and selected wines and beers, laundry, Wi-Fi access, excursions and use of bikes. Cocktails are \$US8 and massages in the spa are reasonably priced. There are also a gym and a library. Aqua Expeditions also operates the 16-suite Aria Amazon and 12-suite Aqua Amazon in Peru. More: aquaexpeditions.com. Abercrombie & Kent offers three-night Aqua Mekong cruises between Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City from \$US3315 (\$4235) a person twin-share. A nine-night Journey on the Mekong features two nights in Ho Chi Minh City with private transfers, private city sightseeing tour and a seven-night Aqua Mekong cruise, from \$US11,220 a person twin-share. More: abercrombiekent.com.au. • vietnamairlines.com

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