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STYLE

THE NEW VOICE OF AVANT-GARDE ASIA



TECH-SAVVY BRANDS

STAY ONE STEP AHEAD
OF THE E-TAIL TREND

ETHAN KOH

DESIGNS FOR THE WOMAN
WHO HAS IT ALL

EYEWEAR NAMES

HAVE A VISION
FOR LUXURY

STORY CYNTHIA ROSENFELD

RIVER RAPTURE

New breed of ships cruising to remote destinations in the Amazon and Southeast Asia with hotel-level luxury



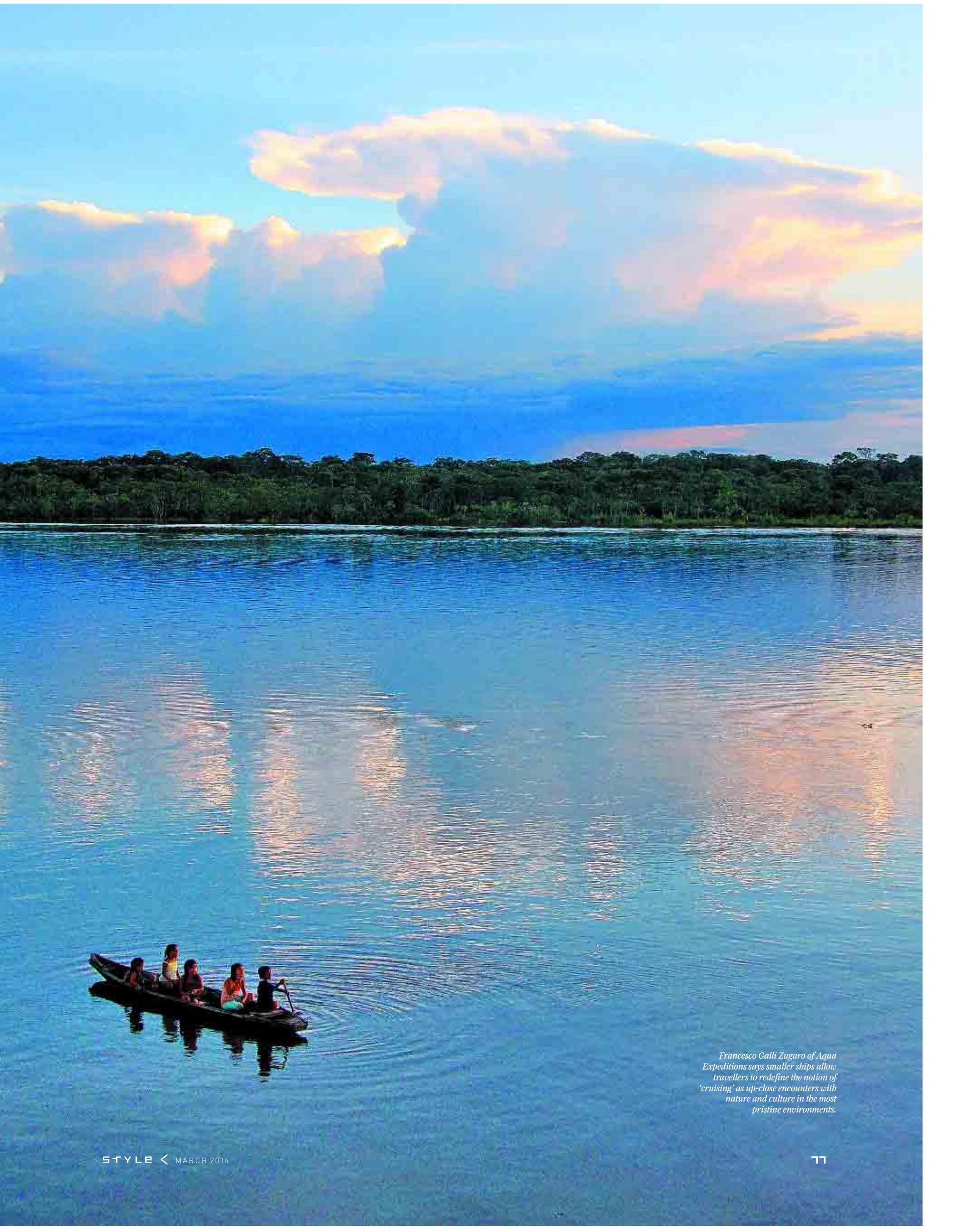
ABOVE
*An Anantara
cruise passes by
Wat Arun.*

At precisely 6.30am on our first morning aboard the Aria Amazon on the Peruvian stretch of the Amazon River, I slip into a camouflage life jacket and board one of four aluminium-sided skiffs headed for a tributary called the Pacaya River. Over the next four mesmerising hours, our group of 20 – plus four English-speaking naturalist guides – peer through binoculars into the soaring tree branches along the riverbanks in search of yellow-headed caracara, ring kingfishers and short-tailed parrots.

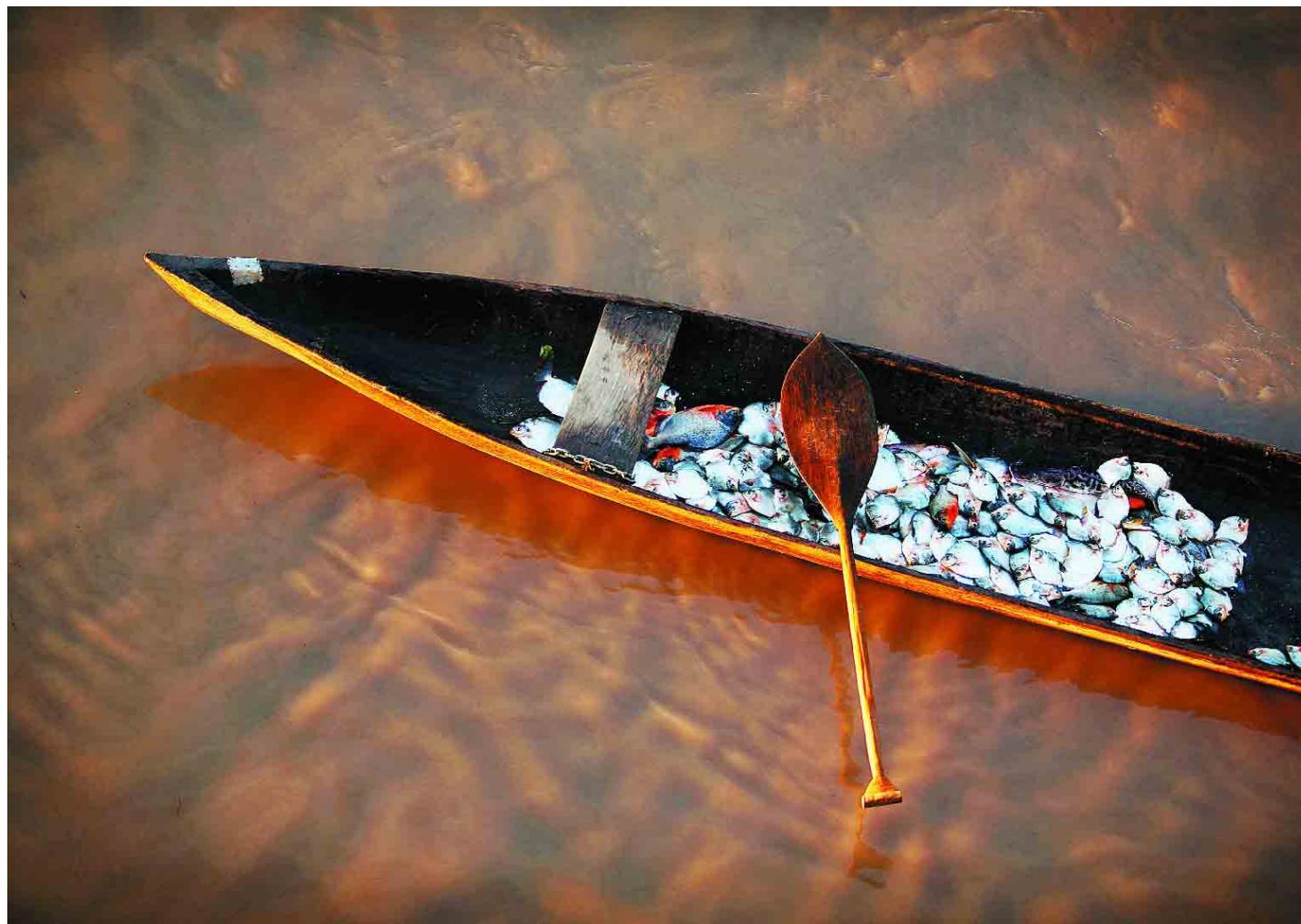
Thanks to our guide Julio's eagle eye, we watch a single capuchin monkey prance along a tree branch

and ogle a pair of rare Taricaya turtles lumbering up the muddy riverbank. Julio then calls for us to look down just as three caiman crocodiles poke their beady eyes and elongated, scaly bodies out of the dark water. Seconds later, three pink river dolphins roll dorsal fin first alongside our skiffs.

Smaller ships such as the 16-cabin Aria Amazon are like no other form of modern luxury transport, taking guests to otherwise inaccessible destinations along the world's greatest rivers, and doing so without destroying the delicate environments. For this reason, while my four-night trip aboard Aqua ➔



Francesco Galli Zugaro of Aqua Expeditions says smaller ships allow travellers to redefine the notion of 'cruising' as up-close encounters with nature and culture in the most pristine environments.



RIGHT
Visitors aboard the *Aqua Amazon* see the everyday life of local fishermen.

BELOW
Guests on these river cruises witness all manners of exotic wildlife, such as macaws.



Expeditions' Lima-based ship is my maiden voyage through the Amazon, it is not my first river cruise, nor will it be my last.

I recently developed an attraction to this emerging form of intellectually stimulating yet entirely luxurious escapism on board the *Anantara Song*. The exquisitely restored teak rice barge and its even more spacious sibling, the *Anantara Dream*, cruise 70km back in time along Thailand's Chao Praya – the "River of Kings".

The ships travel from Bangkok to Ayutthaya, founded in 1350 by King U-Thong as the second capital, after Sukhothai of the Kingdom of Siam.

Anantara Cruises' slow boats indulgently extend this four-hour round trip into leisurely two- or three-day journeys featuring five-star guestrooms, exceptional gastronomic experiences and dedicated travel guides.

As the vintage vessel sails out of Bangkok's bustling metropolis towards lush mangroves and simple wood houses on stilts, knowledgeable historians introduce passengers to the grandeur of the Ayutthaya kingdom – an important late 16th-century hub for Asia, Arab and European trade, and

home to emissaries from the Japanese and Chinese imperial courts as well as ambassadors from the Mughal court in Delhi and even Versailles.

En route, guests willing to climb off their cloud-like beds or plush outdoor sun loungers can follow Anantara's guides around the 17th-century Bang Pa-In Royal Palace, with its Chinese, baroque, gothic and Victorian structures enhanced by tropical gardens and topiary.

Everyone disembarks at the Unesco World Heritage site of Ayutthaya, where the ship's eloquent experts bring a crumbling collection of soaring prang reliquary towers and monumental Buddhist temples to life by sharing insider details. At the 15th-century Wat Ratchaburana, for example, they explain that the shrine was built to commemorate two princes who both died in a duel atop elephants to determine who would assume the throne.

On both sides of the globe, the river cruisers have been designed with the comforts of a world-class hotel, including thoughtful touches such as the *Aria Amazon's* powerful rainforest shower and Amazon-inspired cuisine from executive chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino. ➔

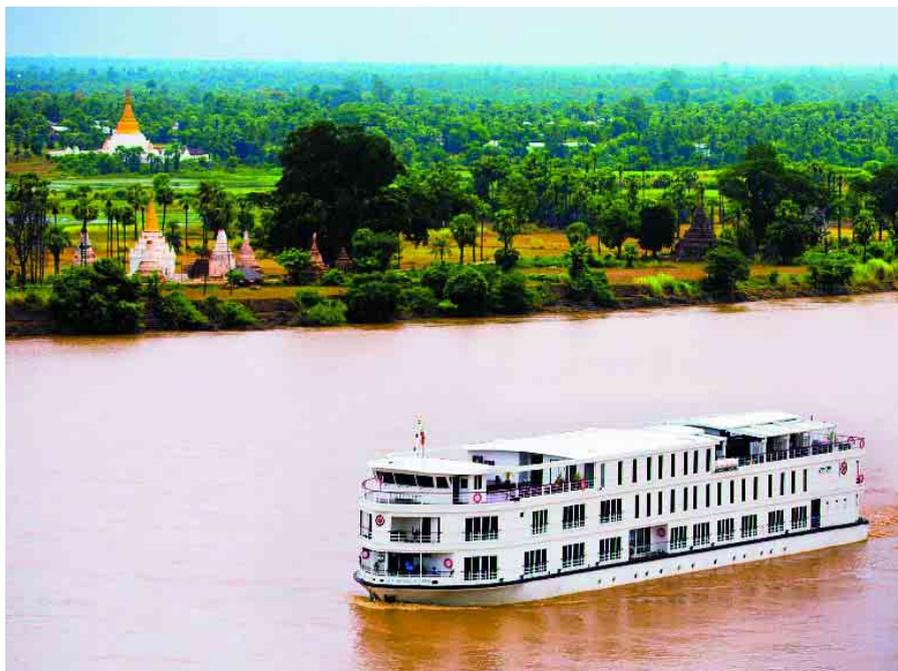
SMALLER SHIPS CRUISE DOWN RIVERS WITHOUT DAMAGING THE DELICATE ENVIRONMENT



LEFT
*Catch a glimpse of
exotic wildlife aboard
the Aqua Amazon.*

BELOW
*The Anantara Dream
Lounge area*





Yet, luxurious river cruising in the 21st century calls for turning these well-endowed boats into a mere backdrop, instead emphasising what Aqua Expeditions founder Francesco Galli Zugaro calls “eye-level cruising”.

For this purpose, a floor-to-ceiling wall of windows facing the river completes all 16 suites aboard the Aria Amazon and in the even more intimate 12-cabin Aqua Amazon.

And Aqua Expeditions’ third ship, the Aqua Mekong, will be cruising the Mekong River between Cambodia and Vietnam this year.

Why spend so much money building floating pleasure palaces only to turn travellers’ attention away from them? Galli Zugaro says it’s because “smaller ships allow us to redefine the notion of ‘cruising’ as a series of up-close encounters with nature and culture in the most pristine environments – like an African safari, but on the river”.

Orient Express – which from the 10th of this month will be renamed Belmond – has been proving this





IT'S LIKE AN AFRICAN SAFARI, BUT ON THE RIVER **FRANCESCO GALLI ZUGARO OF AQUA EXPEDITIONS**

ABOVE
Smaller ships allow travellers to meander through tributaries to catch a glimpse of undisturbed wildlife.

TOP LEFT
This year, Orient Express launched the smaller 25-cabin Orcaella, which sails southwest from Mandalay on the Irrawaddy River before following the upper Chindwin River, up to now largely unseen by tourists.

LEFT
The elaborate restaurant area of the Orcaella.

statement for the past 17 years on Myanmar's Irrawaddy River with three- to 11-night cruises aboard the 43-cabin Road to Mandalay, a converted Rhine cruiser. Earlier this year, the company launched the smaller 25-cabin Orcaella, each with floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors.

The 11-day, 1,600km voyage sails southwest from Mandalay beginning on the Irrawaddy before following the upper Chindwin River, which has been largely unseen by tourists until now.

The Orcaella makes it possible for the first time since the days of the Bombay Burmah Trading Company for foreigners to dine in the colonial-era administrator's teak house in the remote riverside town of Mawlaik, to watch elephants at work in the nearby forest and to explore small villages along the Chindwin, awe-struck locals who are still unused to the presence of non-natives among their bamboo houses on stilts and gilded Buddhist stupas.

Southeast Asia-bound river travellers without a week and a half to spare only have to wait until September, when the Aqua Mekong is set to launch with three-, four- and seven-night itineraries that will include mountaintop monk blessings, emerald-hued forest excursions and, of course, the option to relax and watch the Mekong River flow from inside one of 20 indulgently-appointed suites. ✕

GOURMET ON BOARD

It's not often that you find Michelin stars outside a trendy, fast-paced urban environment – not to mention while cruising down a river. As Aqua Expeditions kicks off in Asia, CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro is working hard to build a "unique guest experience". And part of such a well-rounded experience lies in providing good food.

Galli Zugaro hand-picked Michelin-starred chef David Thompson of Bangkok's Nahm restaurant to head the kitchen for the luxury river cruise. Calling Thompson a "perfect fit", Galli Zugaro is keen for the chef to bring his Southeast Asian flair aboard the Aqua Mekong.

Throughout the journey, the highlight of the meals will be fresh, locally sourced ingredients – a much more interesting concept when the ingredients include speciality items sourced along the way. Taking inspiration from the Mekong River, Thompson and his team will use the catch of the day and local ingredients plucked from markets in nearby cities to dish up an array of Southeast Asian delicacies.

"There'll be one or two tasting menus on offer, depending on the length of the journey," says Galli Zugaro, who is looking to create a relaxed fine-dining atmosphere for his guests. And there's no fear of being bored of the same dishes after seven days sailing down the river, because as Galli Zugaro says proudly: "The menu never repeats itself."

Joanne Lam

