



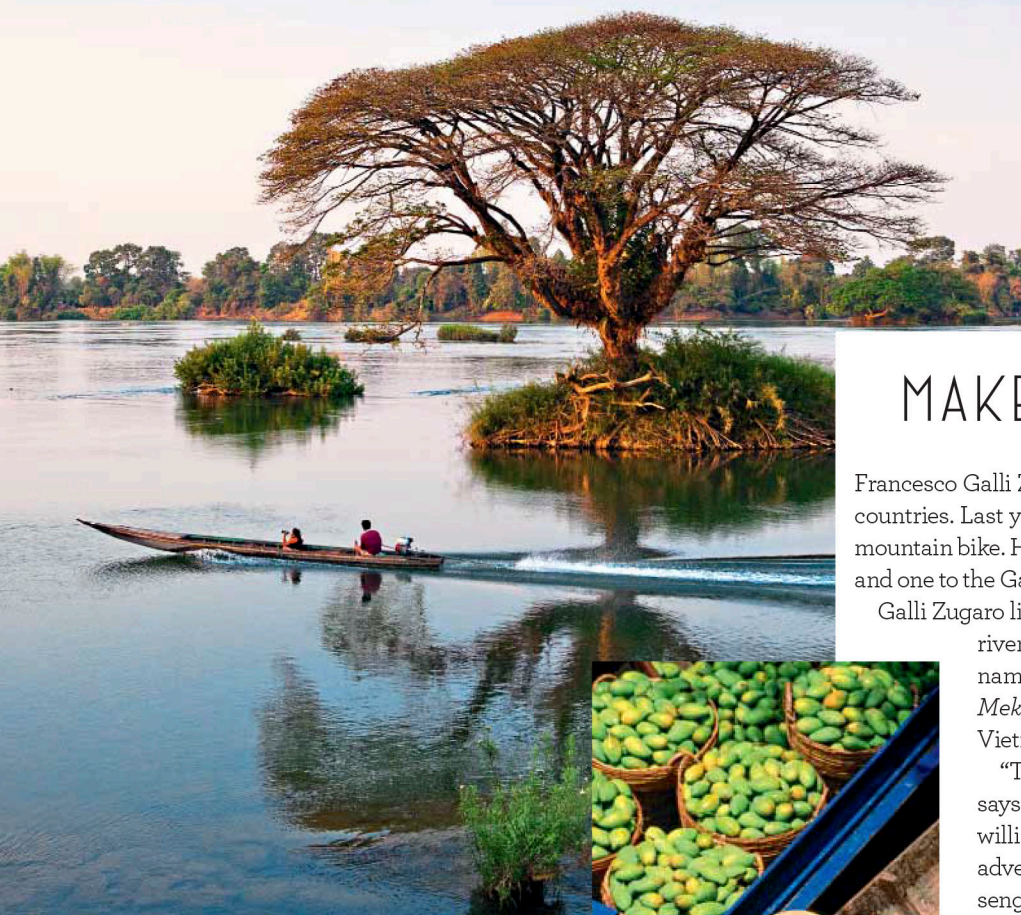
LIVE STREAMING

From the Mekong to the Amazon,
Bordeaux to Budapest, river cruises are
proving the new “nine-to-five adventure”.
Qantas The Australian Way correspondents
report in from the comfort zone.

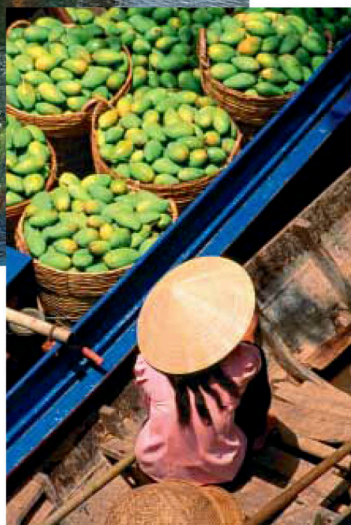


Aboard Belmond's *Orcaella*

Don Det island in the Mekong River, Cambodia/Laos border



Floating market in the Mekong Delta, An Giang province, Vietnam (right); bananas afloat on the Mekong (below)



MAKE MINE MEKONG

Francesco Galli Zugaro, CEO of Aqua Expeditions, has lived in 14 countries. Last year, he crossed the Nimib Desert in 14 days on a mountain bike. He launched one of the first Amazon River cruises and one to the Galapagos Islands before that.

Galli Zugaro likes to think outside the box. And he loves a good river – the Amazon, Nile, Ganges, Ayeyarwady – you name it. To that end, this month he is launching *Aqua Mekong*, a 20-suite cruise boat option that takes in Vietnam and Cambodia.

“These are for people who have been everywhere,” he says during a Sydney pit stop earlier this year. “They are willing to do whatever we can give them. It’s about soft adventure, wanting to do something different. Our passengers have done African safaris, the Galapagos, tiger trekking. They want turn-on, turn-off adventure, 9 to 5.”

Aqua Mekong is eye-level cruising, he maintains: having a glimpse into other people’s lives along the river.

“We have a very demanding clientele. They want local staff, an authentic experience. Some might want to go with a guide to shop for food at the markets to cook at a cooking class; 10 might want to go on a bicycle trip around the backwaters of Cambodia. Or stay on board to hear a guest lecturer speak.

“We offer not *haute cuisine*, but family-style dishes. We have set up suppliers along the river and [Australian Michelin-starred chef] David Thompson gives me his right-hand chefs, always people who have trained under him.”

The 64m *Aqua Mekong* will carry a maximum of 40 guests and 40 staff. Cabins are 30sq m, with picture windows, several with balconies. It has three decks, the third storey being a glass-walled observation lounge (with air-conditioning).

Asia is also a focus of Uniworld, whose 2015 program of 11 to 18-day cruises aboard boutique riverboats takes in China, Vietnam and Cambodia. Shore excursions include temples, art and theatre, water puppet shows, five-star hotels and fine local food (uniworldcruises.com.au).

SUSAN SKELLY

➤ **Aqua Mekong** cruises will run over three, four or seven nights, from \$3315 for 2015. aquaexpeditions.com