

FINANCIAL TIMES

fine times

NOVEMBER 22 2014

28-PAGE
BEAUTY SPECIAL

how to spend it
special celebration edition





At 6am in central Cambodia, when the brilliant pastel wash of the sunrise has just begun to fade from the sky, the temperature is already creeping upwards of 30 degrees. Here, anchored in the middle of the Tonlé Sap river, the air is utterly still, weighted with moisture; when I crack the sliding glass doors leading from my

cabin out onto my balcony, condensation shoots up the panes almost immediately. The surface of the river beyond is mirror-flat, brown streaked with a rich deep jade, stretching to a placid shore that's haphazardly parcelled into rice paddies as far as the horizon – a patchwork of lush green plants and the dull quicksilver gleam of water, dotted by the occasional sugar palm reaching for the sky.

I've woken on the first morning of a three-day journey aboard *Aqua Mekong* (pictured right and overleaf), a 20-cabin river cruiser launched in mid-October that plies the Mekong and Tonlé Sap rivers from Ho Chi Minh City, in southern Vietnam, north to Siem Reap in Cambodia. I'd boarded the previous evening in Phnom Penh as a guest of

Main picture: the 20-cabin river cruiser *Aqua Mekong*. Insets from top: a stilted temple on Tonlé Sap lake. Moat Khla floating market on the lake. Kampong Khleang floating village



AQUA SERENE

only its second excursion, which will head up the Tonlé Sap and into Tonlé Sap lake – at this time of year, flooded from months of rain, its wetlands are lush with hyacinth and giant mimosa, rather than the green-bean crops that are cultivated here during the drier months. Earlier in the day, I'd met up in Phnom Penh with friends who had boarded her in Vietnam and cruised up the Mekong on the inaugural journey; they raved about the sleek design and extolled the virtues of the on-board guides, who'd led them on mountain-bike trails through rice paddies and taken them to private homes where they were prepared lunch by villagers. This next leg of the upriver journey was to be new territory for the boat, with a full house of guests on board; so we were guinea pigs of sorts.

I say "of sorts" because Aqua Expeditions founder and CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro isn't the kind of person to leave much to chance, so the odds of us having anything but a fairly stellar experience were small. Galli Zugaro's two boats on the Peruvian Amazon, *Aqua Amazon* (launched in 2008) and *Aria Amazon* (2011), aren't known just for their bar-setting design (the eminent Peruvian architect Jordi Puig is responsible for the look of both) and world-class dining, but also for the depth of experience they offer. With at least three tenders and a minimum of three guides on board each,

the Amazon cruisers drill deep into the wilderness, culture and untrammelled heart of South America's mightiest river. Galli Zugaro's reputation for exacting standards, due diligence and creative thinking are matched by very few in the experiential luxury world; he moved his entire family to Singapore two-and-a-half years ago and has since been based on and off in Vietnam, conducting recce excursions, recruiting and training guides and staff, and painstakingly cultivating relationships with artisan communities, pagodas, and way, way-off-the-radar villages all up and down both rivers in preparation for her launch. There were week-long aerial mappings of the Tonlé Sap lake by helicopter, and hikes to hilltop monasteries to sit in conversation with monks, convincing them to receive guests in blessing ceremonies. An extensive search for the right executive chef culminated at the end of last year in the very fortuitous signing of David Thompson – he of Nahm, Bangkok's (and perhaps the world's) finest Thai restaurant.

Expectations, then, were high. But despite a few very minor fits and starts relating to some permit delays and a resultant last-minute juggle of the schedule, the *Aqua Mekong* was ready for us. To start with, she is, like her Amazonian sisters, undeniably lovely to look at. Unlike the other luxury cruisers that ply these waterways –

Heritage Line's *Javan* and *Jayaverman*, and the several run by Pandaw River Expeditions – *Aqua Mekong* skews decisively slick, and contemporary. The cabins (example pictured overleaf) are sparsely but beautifully furnished, and capacious (the smallest clocks in at 320sq ft), each bathroom kitted out with double basins and a huge lacquer-tiled shower (one wall of which is floor-to-ceiling glass, cleverly rendered private by louvred external teak blinds); half have terraces with small daybeds, the other bay-window-style seating flush against the paned glass. There is a bijou gym facing a sundeck punctuated by potted frangipani and Balinese daybeds, and a two-suite spa, all cream linen and eggshell tiled walls. The top-deck lounge and bar, which stretches nearly the length of the boat, is configured such that guests can socialise in large or small groups; the younger ones (the *Aqua Mekong* accepts children aged seven and up) loved the library, with its board games and foosball table, while the media room, fitted out with Eames lounge chairs and state-of-the-art digital screening equipment, drew all ages on the rainy evenings.

Designed by Galli Zugaro, with interiors by Saigon-based architects Noor Design, the *Aqua Mekong* was built in Ho Chi Minh by Singapore-based Triyards – a firm normally occupied with massive offshore constructions



Having made its name on the Peruvian Amazon with ultra-luxurious cruises that drill deep into the river's wilderness, Aqua Expeditions now takes on the mighty Mekong. Maria Shollenbarger boards a sleek new vessel and immerses herself in floating temples, bird sanctuaries and Buddhist-Hindu culture



Phnom Penh and Cai Mep, Vietnam; but the frequency with which we came upon scenes little changed in decades was remarkable. We motored in the skiffs one morning through swaths of hyacinth towards Kampong Chhnang, one of Cambodia's largest towns and a floating village (example pictured on previous pages); the river lapped gently up against patios on the richly painted stilted houses – milky-blue with kelly-green trellises, hibiscus pink, rich yellow-gold. Hœurm told me that during the dry season the villagers can park trucks or erect ad hoc living rooms underneath them, so much lower is the water-level. We disembarked briefly at a pale-yellow school house, trailed by a passel of tiny, uniformed children, squealing and brandishing rulers and balloons, nearly levitating with glee at this exotic diversion from their routine lessons. Many of the floating villages are populated largely by Vietnamese who fled their country after the war of 1955-1975, as well as Khmer fishermen; on the chalkboards, lessons were written out in both languages. Later we tied up at a floating ice factory, hearing of how one family enterprising enough to save for a small petrol-fed generator had parlayed the

purchase into a virtual ice-making empire, supplying fishing boats well beyond the village. Amid frozen blocks covered with plastic tarpaulins were two altars: one to the Buddha and one to the Virgin Mary (various Christian humanitarian missions have over the decades left their mark along the river as well).

That afternoon, we returned to the docks at Kampong Chhnang town proper, for a ride into the countryside to visit traditional potters and palm-sugar producers. Those who didn't make the excursion astride one of

From above: an observation deck aboard *Aqua Mekong*. Its private cinema. A design suite with balcony



The first key to her exceptional river access are custom-designed tenders that allow guests to break into smaller groups and speed into shallows

and container rigs, and not sleek boutique river craft, but Galli Zugaro needed the expertise of a world-class yard to handle the specs for such a unique boat. She is 62.4m long, with a draft of just under 1.5m – the first key to her exceptional river access. The second is the four tenders Galli Zugaro had custom-designed by a specialised yard in Perth – slick, light, marine-grade aluminum skiffs that allow guests to break into smaller groups, benefiting from guide-to-guest ratios not matched by any other river cruiser working here, and to speed into the shallower parts of the rivers, particularly the floodplains bordering Tonlé Sap lake, that other cruisers never reach.

All this adds up to days that play out in much the same way a luxury safari does, but with a pronounced cultural component. The early risers among us headed up to the top deck for rich Javanese coffee or tea before 7am, when breakfast was taken in the second-deck dining room. While traditional Khmer num ban chok soup, omelettes and several each of serious French pastries and fresh-pressed tropical juices were served, Visoth San or Hœurm Hut, the lead guides, would brief us on the day's

excursions – one each morning and one each late afternoon, allowing for maximum enjoyment of the *Aqua Mekong's* facilities, the estimable talents in the kitchen and the breezy foredeck (complete with plunge pool) during the sometimes crushingly hot midday hours.

The experiences on offer were as richly diverse as the Tonlé Sap river and lake themselves, which, when the Mekong floods during the wet seasons, are inundated with its reverse flow; the lake regularly quadruples in size, to 10,300km sq. The Mekong basin is second only to the Amazon in richness of biodiversity (when I asked Galli Zugaro why he'd set his sights here, his response was immediate and succinct: "Because Siem Reap is the Macchu Picchu of Asia, and the Mekong is its Amazon.") New species are still routinely identified along the river, augmenting the thousands of native ones already familiar to science (and no small number of invasive ones, which have various effects on the ecosystem). The Lower Mekong and its tributaries play a vital role in trade and shipping today, as they have for centuries, with container- and deep-water ports in both

Aqua Mekong's mountain bikes were collected by tuk tuk, and together we buzzed and pedalled out past the happy chaos of rural village commerce and into the rice paddies, the late-afternoon light pouring honey-gold down onto the lushly forested hills before us. A wedding party, the young bride and groom in full regalia for an evening rehearsal, saw us passing; we were invited in for blessings and many mutually exchanged smiles and compliments. Later, in the village of the palm-sugar master, we came instead upon the funeral of a 93-year-old village matriarch; a pyre draped in black and white bunting was erected next to the master's house. While he manoeuvred effortlessly up into the 15m heights of the palms encircling his property, sung dirges blared from speakers erected around the pyre, and dozens of locals and family circled it slowly on foot three times, as required by tradition. Two female relatives, dressed and veiled in white, carried an image of the deceased woman between them. The palm-sugar master, his face folding into a thousand beautiful creases every time he smiled, which



was often, told our guides to tell us that, here, 93 years is an improbably long and good life. Now in his mid-60s, he said, he can no longer scale and harvest the 40-odd trees he once did in a single day; these days, he said, he must reconcile himself to a mere 15.

In the evenings, back on board, the action tended to happen around the bar that anchors one end of the lounge. Galli Zugaro enlisted the Hong Kong-Singapore boutique distributors Proof & Company and 28 Hong Kong Street, Singapore's buzziest cocktail lounge, to create a genuine showpiece. Besides excellent cocktails, there was extensive discourse on the attributes of various obscure single malts and London dry gins between 28 Hong Kong Street's Leo Chue (with a mellow drawl that skewed more Santa Cruz than Singapore, and a daunting encyclopedic knowledge of all things booze-related) and a few very delighted male guests. At supper – served family-style to groups that formed and reconstituted genially at each meal, as guests became acquainted – we dined on what the market and the river had provided: thus one evening delivered us a full Thai feast, with salads enlivened by chilli and lemongrass and tiny, delicate pink-frilled scallops from the gulf of Siam; another featured a Mediterranean feast of *insalata caprese*, roasted lamb, and decadent ravioli stuffed with pine nuts and laced with brown butter. Thompson's Nahm team handled the flavours of Campania with the same skill as they do those of northern Thailand, and were as gracious on the floor as they were competent in the galley.

Our last day on board, at the widest point of Tonlé Sap lake – in the rainy season, around 105km across – was our loveliest, and the day on which the *Aqua Mekong* truly asserted her prowess. In the mid-afternoon, under a vast dome of sky thick with creamy stacks of cumulus cloud, we boarded the skiffs and headed due east for the village of Moat Khla (pictured on opening pages), where monks at a floating temple were to bless us. We arrived to some quiet fanfare – Moat Khla isn't entirely off the tourist grid, but it's hardly well known – and were received by a small cohort of teenage monks, their shaved heads and brows lending them an air of perpetual surprise (probably augmented by the crush of tall pale westerners, suddenly sitting on their heels expectantly before them), led by a wizened elder with a lambent smile, round gold spectacles, and the thickly muscled arms

An Aqua Mekong tender on a Tonlé Sap lake excursion

of a prize fighter. We received a shyly sung blessing, drowned out occasionally by the harsh motor buzz of local boys tearing up and down the canal in their longtail boats, followed by a brief question session. The monks then asked questions of us: where did we come from? (A mix, mostly, of North and South America and Australia, with some Italians for good measure.) Why Cambodia? What did we want to learn? Underscoring the exchange were the sounds of river life: the splash of children at play, the nattering of two women bartering over batteries or the price of their fruit, the *tok-tok-tok* of the few generators belonging to those wealthy enough to own them.

As the clouds thickened, we sped further east, through giant mimosa and lotus, threading between copses of mangrove, stopping briefly in the tiny floating village of Kong Meas before powering on. Bar the odd fisherman, hunched forward into a slender comma in his longtail boat, there was no sign of civilisation. The sky roiled gently, its mutations reflected in the still, glass-green waters around us, until our skiffs cut through them and the reflections exploded, wavering wildly in the twin wakes. In its aqueous beauty, in the wide skies and stretches of verdant flora, with a dozen cranes flying low and bright white across the channels, the scene recalled the Okavango Delta. It was only a few miles from the buzz of Moat Khla, but felt a world away. I asked Hoeurm if any other of the Mekong cruisers were able to access these floodplains; smiling equably, squinting in the late-afternoon light, he shook his head no.

A light drizzle began to fall, backlit here and there by beams of sun still casting themselves down in thick opalescent columns. A double rainbow appeared suddenly before us. *Ooohs* and *aaahs* sounded, camera shutters clicked. We sped back towards the lights of the boat, anchored beyond the floodplain, through a molten dusk, in a hushed corner of a beautiful and, it transpires, still not entirely discovered waterway. ♦

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of Cazenove + Loyd (020-7384 2332; www.cazloyd.com), which offers five nights in Cambodia, staying three nights on the Aqua Mekong (www.aquaexpeditions.com) full board, sailing from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap in a first-deck suite, with on- and offshore excursions, and two nights at Amansara half board, with all house beverages and twice-daily sightseeing tours with a private guide, from £3,800 per person based on two sharing, including return flights with Singapore Airlines (0844-800 2380; www.singaporeair.com) and private transfers.