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BTLUXE CHRISTMAS 2014



## THE NEW LUXURY

Luxury takes on new meaning as understatement takes precedence over ostentation, and experience over decadence. We bring you what's good to know, from what to where



# RIVER DEEP

A TRIP ABOARD THE AQUA MEKONG PAIRS AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES OF THE EXOTIC WATERWAY WITH LUXURY ACCOMMODATION AND DAVID THOMPSON DINNERS

BY JAIME EE

**A**dventure is best left to the gung-ho set. Yes, let them get their highs trekking in Nepal, diving with barracudas or parachuting from the skies. You, meanwhile, shall huddle with your good friend National Geographic and enjoy your tour of ancient Mayan temples with corn chips and guacamole. So why are you now on a boat, skimming over the waters of the Prek Toal Flooded Forest deep in the Cambodian waters, scanning the sky for Brahminy kites or coucals – ‘doctor’ birds with an instinct for sourcing healing herbs whose own flesh is used by local people as primitive but effective treatments for bone injuries? Because it’s good to know that if you break your elbow, you should ferment a whole coucal in wine and tape it to your arm for speedy recovery? And that there are some things you can’t Google?

No. You are there because once in a while, an adventure beckons that even you can’t resist. The kind that sends you on a journey into the unknown, but which thankfully ends with a cold towel and welcome drink. Imagine Heart of Darkness – with luxury accommodation and Michelin-level cuisine.

Such is the allure of the Aqua Mekong – a brand new expedition vessel that cruises through Cambodia and Vietnam along the exotic Mekong and its soul mate Tonlé Sap Lake – the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia whose rich biodiversity has provided a livelihood for the Cambodian people over generations.

At 62 metres in length, this floating boutique hotel is small enough

to navigate the Tonlé Sap where bloated cruise ships can’t, with a luxury unmatched by other similar-sized vessels. It’s the only ship on the Mekong with its own skiffs – nimble twin-engined speed boats – which can access pockets of the lake the ship isn’t able to, without disturbing the delicate ecosystem around them.

This is how you find yourself cruising gently towards the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary – a safe house where fowl of all feathers converge – either permanent residents or just migrants passing through. You pay little mind to the tufts of green shrubbery dotting the surface of the water until the words ‘flooded forest’ click in your brain. The tufts belong to trees that are easily 8 to 10 metres high, submerged by a curious natural phenomenon where the force of a monsoon-stricken Mekong causes the Tonlé Sap River to reverse its flow into the lake, literally flooding it. By January, the river will switch directions and the lake recedes, making the trees visible again.

Curious whims of Mother Nature aside, another sight to behold awaits in the colourful parade of birds before you: from low-flying pelicans to bright kingfisher clusters; darters posing majestically like black sculptures on tree tops; and of course the coucals – whose doctoring powers may be real or just folklore.

But wait: grab your binoculars (or better still your zoom lens if you have one) for the goosebump-tingling stunner – the sight of trees so heavily laden with birds, it’s as if they’re sagging under a bumper harvest of fruit. The birds must have their own version of TripAdvisor too, zeroing in on just two or three trees to roost in. Such popularity has a price – the trees hosting the most birds look frail

# experiences



with unhealthy foliage and branches, thanks to all that toxic bird poop.

The fact that no one takes pot shots at the birds sitting like easy prey is thanks to the sanctuary's rangers – perched like human birds in their own 'nest' up in the trees high above the water. They take conservation very seriously, so nothing gets past the watchful eyes of these dedicated wardens who keep the place free of rogue hunters and fishermen.

An excursion like this is just one of many highlights of Aqua Mekong, whose raison d'être is "to present exotic rivers around the world to our guests in a very comfortable and exclusive environment, while maintaining a sense of place through daily river and shore excursions," says the ship's owner, Francesco Galli Zugaro.

The Italian-American founder of Aqua Expeditions built the USS10 million ship as a follow-up to his highly successful Aqua Amazon and Aria Amazon – two luxury expedition vessels that ply the Peruvian stretch of the world's longest river.

Wanting to extend that same experience to Asia, he found his next Amazon in Vietnam and Cambodia, with the added lure of Angkor Wat as the equivalent of Peru's Machu Picchu. Depending on your time, preference and budget (it costs US\$1,050 per person per night), you pick from three, four or seven-night itineraries – all of which are variations of the route from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh in Cambodia, crossing over to Chau Doc at the border and ending off in Ho Chi Minh. Or the other way around.

Sailing from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh as you do, there's ample opportunity for you to immerse yourself in the Cambodian culture and way of life, thanks to the ship's Cambodian and Vietnamese guides. These guys are proud of what they do, and do it really well, and the last thing they want is to direct you to the nearest souvenir shop. Even if you secretly wish they would.

Rather, they will take you to see entire communities living on the lake in remote floating villages that will make you rethink your disorientation with property prices. Whether it's the massive Kampong Khleang or slightly more compact Chnok Tru, the way these hundreds, if not thousands, of families have built up such an organised, self-sustaining infrastructure is such a gobsmacking example of how man can adapt to his surroundings. Houses are built entirely on water and portable, so they can be tugged by boat to more conducive surroundings if the lake conditions demand it.

They live on the water because that's where their livelihood is. Most are fishermen and their homes are built above underwater cages where they hold their fish – whether caught or farmed. If they're not fishermen, they're traders – selling everything from meat and vegetables to sundries. There is a clinic. A school. A church. A mobile phone shop. Even a police station.

They're poor – earning less than US\$1 or US\$2 a day, if at all. But despite the pang of guilt that hits you, there's no denying the beauty of a people who find joy despite hardship, and the simple thrills they get from waving to you from their homes and seeing you wave back.

It's the same experience on shore at Koh Chen (Chinese Island), a village known for its silversmiths, or Kampong Chhnang (Pottery Village), where potters still make their clayware the same way they have for centuries. Sure, commercialism has arrived with kids trying to sell you trinkets but they do it in a gentle, not harassing way. And they get a bigger kick out of posing for photos and having you show them their grinning faces on your camera screen.

It is not lost on you that they return to their spartan homes while you are helped out of your fancy skiff by multiple deck hands, to rest and relax amidst the trappings of a deluxe hotel. After drinks at the bar, you might be lucky enough to be personally served dinner by acclaimed chef David Thompson, whose Bangkok restaurant Nahm is the reigning Number 1 on the Asia's 50 Best list.

As the consultant chef, Thompson will make occasional appearances even as the kitchen staff on board are already well-equipped to replicate his recipes for western classics or exquisite Thai fare such as a julienned mango salad in sweet tamarind dressing, chicken and banana blossom salad, stir-fried crab with fresh and dried Cambodian peppercorn, or fiery red curry and Bangkok laksa that give you as much pleasure as it does gut-wrenching pain. You can choose to recover in your designer chic cabin, or submit to the calming touch of the in-house spa therapists.

At US\$1,050 a night, it may sound a little sticker shock-worthy, until you work in the three meals a day, the comprehensive guided tours and the kind of personalised attention you can only get on a ship that doesn't take in more than 40 guests in its 20 cabins at a time.

Besides, you'll be hard put to return to the National Geographic channel after this, especially now that you have a head full of priceless memories to turn on anytime you want. ♦



### A TRIP TO REMEMBER

The Aqua Mekong is a brand new luxury expedition vessel – and boutique hotel – that cruises through Cambodia and Vietnam along the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake. It takes up to 40 guests in 20 cabins at US\$1,050 per person a night, including three meals a day and guided tours

PHOTOS: AQUA MEKONG



### THE FLOODED FOREST

Birds of all feathers converge on a tree, which is in fact 8-10 metres high but submerged by flooding river waters

PHOTO: NICK WALTON

Rangers at the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary keep an eye out for rogue hunters and fishermen

PHOTO: SAMUEL BEE



### VILLAGE LIFE

A fresh meat seller brings her produce to customers on the water

PHOTO: SAMUEL BEE



### THE NAHM WAY

David Thompson, whose Bangkok restaurant Nahm is Number 1 on the Asia's Best 50 list, is consultant chef on the Aqua Mekong. The dinner menu includes his exquisite Thai fare such as stir-fried crab with fresh and dried Cambodian peppercorn

PHOTOS: SAMUEL BEE

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