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APPROACH'**  
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TO BAN  
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# The Border Mail

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## SONNY DAYS

AFTER more than two months apart, it was the happiest of reunions for Sonny and his family yesterday. The much-loved pet had been due to be put down after he was seized in September but owner Ljubisa Stanic took the matter to the Victorian Civil and Administration Tribunal and won. Mr Stanic said he and son Andrej now had a lot of catching up to do with their pet. Report, another KYLIE ESLER picture, page 6

# CAP IN HAND

## Relief for ratepayers as Labor vows to keep promise

BY DAVID JOHNSTON

THE Victorian government will deliver on a pre-election promise to cap future rate rises.

In the first public statement on the proposal since the Andrews Labor government came to power a fortnight ago, Local Government Minister Natalie Hutchins has confirmed future council rate rises will be restricted to CPI increases.

The decision is expected to be welcomed by ratepayers, but will put Labor on a collision course with councils and representative bodies including the Municipal Association of Victoria.

It is expected to force a major re-examination of how councils operate with the annual loss of millions of dollars.

But Ms Hutchins appears determined to press ahead.

"Local residents have had enough of wasteful council spending and increased council rates," a spokesperson for Ms Hutchins said.

"(Prime Minister) Tony Abbott and the Liberals are already increasing taxes and charges on Victorians and local councils shouldn't make it worse.

"It is why the Andrews Labor government will cap council

rate increases and reduce the waste.

"The councils will have to focus on the services people need and not the stunts that drive up rates.

"The council budgets will come under the scrutiny of an independent commission and unnecessary spending will be exposed."

The minister's statement said the government would consult

with the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Victorian Local Governance Association and the Australian Services Union on the guidelines for the independent umpire.

Municipal Association of Victoria president Bill McArthur said his organisation remained vehemently opposed to the introduction of rate-capping.

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**Residents have had enough of wasteful council spending and increased council rates**  
**SPOKESMAN FOR THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT**

29° TODAY Sunny

31° TOMORROW Shower

35° MONDAY Storm

31° TUESDAY Shower

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TRAVEL / CRUISE

# MEKONG MEMORIES

Step on board the Aqua Mekong to explore this amazing part of south east Asia in style – and as **SUE WALLACE** discovers every day reveals something new.

**T**HE “show” starts about 6am every day as I throw back the curtains and take my front row seat in a spacious suite on the new boutique cruiser, Aqua Mekong, which leaves a stylish wake on the mighty Mekong River.

There’s a parade of tiny, colourful wooden boats laden with fresh fruit and vegetables piled high and half-submerged barges carrying sand and hefty logs on the river most mornings.

But it’s the families on bigger boats that intrigue the most.

Hammocks slung between poles and makeshift kitchens with steaming woks are common sights as well as lean-looking dogs that prance the length of the barges.

There are family scenes of children playing, mothers feeding babies and young men glued to mobile phones as they head along the waterway.

Waves and smiles are offered freely. Welcome to life on the Mekong, the longest river in south east Asia and the 12th longest in the world. It stretches 4350 kilometres from the icy Tibetan plateau and meanders through Laos and Thailand to the floodplains of Cambodia and Vietnam, finally emptying into the South China Sea.

This seven-night cruise from Vietnam to Cambodia provides plenty of time for river watching as well as twice daily excursions to get to know the culture, traditions and people of these two countries.

We visit small villages — always gathering a following of curious adults and cute children — larger towns and cities, emerald forests and bamboo stilt settlements.

It is not hard to see why chief executive officer and founder of Aqua Expeditions, Francesco Galli Zugaro, who has carved his name in the world of luxury and adventure, decided to launch his newest venture on the Mekong.

It’s a perfect match with his other two sleek boats, Aqua Amazon and Aria Amazon, which cruise the South American waterway.

“The Mekong has so much to offer — it is such a wonderful river — it’s different from the Amazon but I was looking for somewhere equally captivating,” says Francesco, who never does anything by halves.

The entrepreneur believes luxury is just as much about experiences with memories that last a lifetime as well as creature comforts.

Our cruise starts in Vietnam after a night at the InterContinental Asiana Saigon with its 21 storeys rising above cosmopolitan Hai Ba Trung Street.

It’s a short bus ride to board the black-hulled Aqua Mekong at the port of My Tho, where we met fellow cruisers set for an adventure on this smart new vessel.

The 62.4-metre Aqua Mekong has all the features and style of a five-star hotel yet is sympathetic with the landscape and environment featuring sustainable materials and traditional Vietnamese and Cambodian handicrafts.

Designed by Saigon-based British architect David Hodkinson, of Noor Design, it was built in Vietnam and although compact, there’s a great sense of space from the observation deck with its small plunge pool to the gym.

It accommodates 40 people in 20 suites, some with balconies, and has 40 crew.

All suites have king-size beds and en suites as well as floor-to-ceiling panoramic windows and day beds just perfect for lazing on.

Dining is an adventure with award-winning executive chef David Thompson, of Nahm fame



in Bangkok, designing menus with dishes that feature the tastes of Vietnam and Cambodia. Breakfast is served in the dining room with fresh juices, yoghurt, tropical fruit, pastries and treats such as banana pancakes or tortilla with spinach, mozzarella and asparagus. Lunch is a great selection of salads and noodles and dinner features Asian dishes and tastes associated with the Michelin-starred Thompson. Cocktails and drinks are served in the chic lounge with plump couches and soft lighting with the signature Aqua Piscosour and salted watermelon crush standouts.



But there’s nothing quite like sitting on the deck on a balmy night watching the lights twinkle from the riverbanks and recapping the day’s events. You can be assured that each day reveals more secrets of the Mekong River led by the Aqua Mekong’s knowledgeable guides Hout Houem and San Visoth, who grew up in Cambodia and Man Duc Tuyen in Vietnam. Highlights include a visit to a French colonial mansion, markets, ancient Kymer ruins, an expedition trip to see some of south east Asia’s last water birds and remote tropical forests. Four aluminium tender boats are used for ex-

peditions and the most memorable trip is to Tonle Sap, a combined lake and river system of major importance to Cambodia.

It is the largest freshwater lake in south east Asia and is an ecological hot spot that was designated as a UNESCO biosphere in 1997.

It’s a clean, green haven with pristine waterways, blue skies, fluffy clouds and an amazing bio system. Many Vietnamese families who fled the war reside in colourful water villages and make a living from fishing or if you are entrepreneurial, selling ice.

As we cruise through mangroves, hyacinth and water lilies, we visit a small “floating” school where children smile and wave shyly at first, then engage in serious high fives. We also stop at a floating temple where monks who have never seen “westerners” before ask questions about our lives through an interpreter.

Passengers can also cycle with guides along the fringe of forests and villages and there are visits to see silk weavers, silversmith villages and temples.

Back on board there’s plenty to do — watch a movie in the theatre room, visit the library and games room, shop in the boutique or head to the spa for a massage. Or you can just sit back and watch that never ending “show” that plays out daily on the Mekong in all its glory and, just like Aqua Mekong, it deserves five stars.

“As we cruise through mangroves, hyacinth and water lilies, we visit a small “floating” school where children smile and wave shyly at first ...”



LEFT: The stylish Aqua Mekong.

BELOW LEFT: A sample of the delicacies on offer on board and the smiling faces of Cambodian children.

RIGHT: A young monk at the floating temple.

ABOVE: Shopping the way it’s done at Tonle Sap, Cambodia.

BELOW: The Aqua Mekong offers a memorable experience.

Pictures: SUE WALLACE



## Travel notes

**Cruise:** Aqua Expeditions operates 3, 4 and 7-night up and down river cruises on Aqua Mekong on the Mekong River between Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and Siem Reap, Cambodia. Cruises are priced from \$US3000 per person twin-share for 3 nights and include suite accommodation, beverages (non-alcoholic, house wine and beer), wi-fi, transfers to/from vessel and meeting points in Saigon and Siem Reap and entrance fees on route. Single supplements are available. Call 1800 243 152 or visit aquaexpeditions.com.

**Fly:** Vietnam Airlines offers direct daily flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Ho Chi Minh City and vice versa. As the largest carrier in Indochina, Vietnam Airlines also operates six daily flights between Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap to offer seamless connections to Aqua Mekong. If you are joining or disembarking Aqua Mekong in Phnom Penh, Vietnam Airlines operate three daily flights between Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh. For details see vietnamairlines.com.



## SHORT STAYS

### CANBERRA



Australia in the Great War is one of the most significant First World War exhibitions in the world.

## War on show

THE Australian War Memorial in Canberra has opened its highly anticipated First World War Galleries, Australia in the Great War.

Australia in the Great War is one of the most significant First World War exhibitions in the world, drawing on the memorial’s unique collection of First World War artefacts, technology, uniforms, medals, photographs, film and personal items such as letters and diaries.

The exhibition presents the war chronologically, taking visitors through Gallipoli, the Western Front, Sinai and Palestine, with an added focus on Australia in 1914 and the enduring legacy of the impact of war today.

Visitors will see collections that have never before been on display, including the newly discovered Bullecourt tank components and delicate personal belongings from Pheasant Wood, along with well-known favorites such as the iconic dioramas and the HMT Ascot landing boat.

For more information, go to [visitcanberra.com.au/summer-in-canberra](http://visitcanberra.com.au/summer-in-canberra).

### CAMBODIA



Relax and rejuvenate with a cycle and yoga tour in Asia.

## Tune out time

GET in tune with nature and rejuvenate body and soul with Grasshopper Adventures’ new yoga and cycling tours through the heart of Cambodia next July and November.

Explore the country’s ancient temples, lush jungles and rural villages on two wheels, then stretch tired muscles in the cool mornings or early evenings with a yoga class at your stylish and comfortable guesthouse or eco-resort.

The 12-day trips start in Siem Reap with a dawn cycle around the iconic Angkor Wat temple complex, before heading to Tonle Sap lake, the 7th century ruins of Sambor Prei Kuk, the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh and the coastal resort of Sihanoukville.

Along the way, enjoy fresh, healthy meals, fantastic vistas, and a cultural connection with a land that is blossoming after many years in the wilderness.

Yoga sessions, run by Virginia Slevin of SoulFit Adventures, are designed to complement the day’s riding, with upbeat morning classes and more restorative evening sessions ensuring a restful night’s sleep.

For details visit [grasshopperadventures.com](http://grasshopperadventures.com).