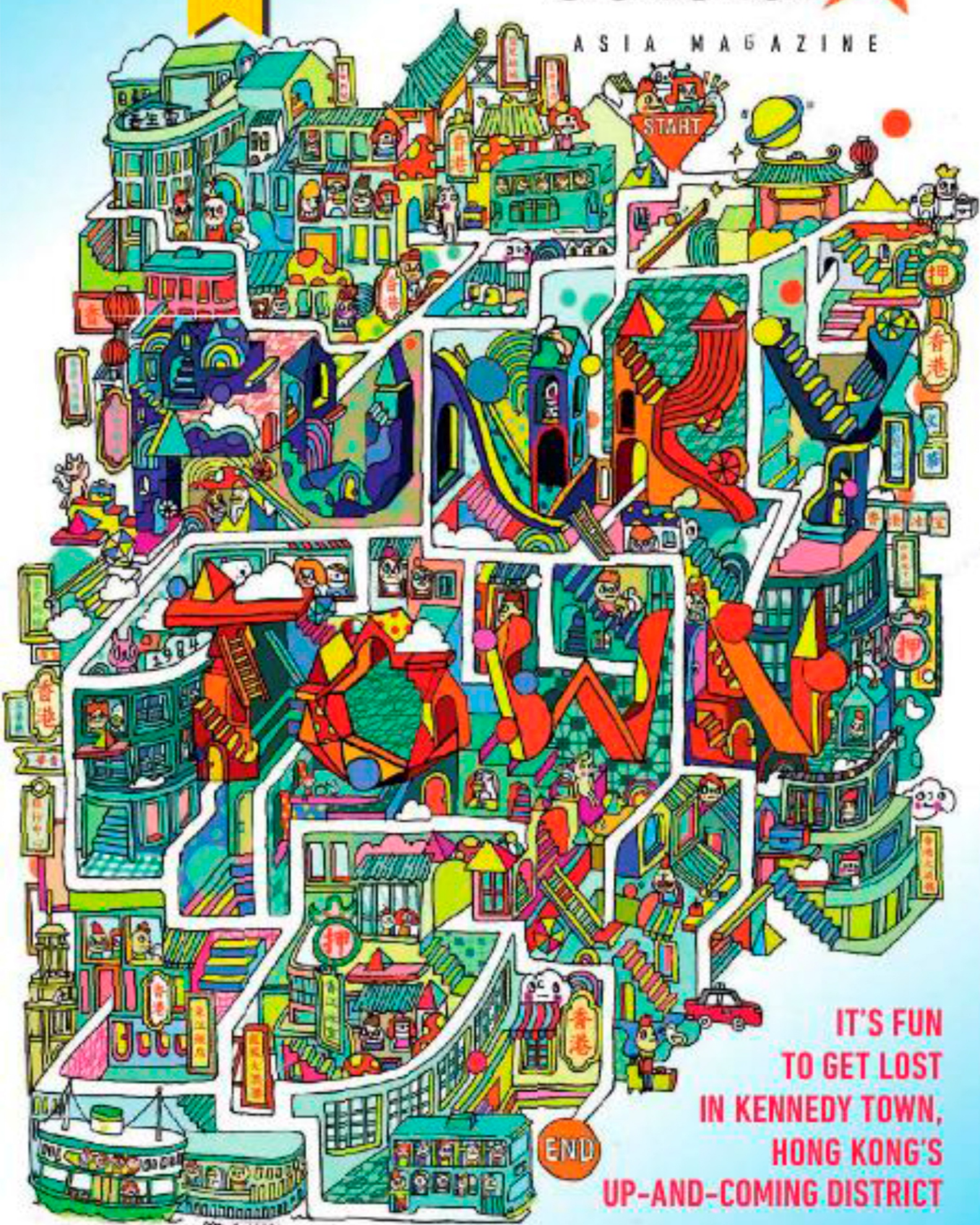


01 | 2015

TAKE
ME
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Jetstar 

ASIA MAGAZINE



IT'S FUN
TO GET LOST
IN KENNEDY TOWN,
HONG KONG'S
UP-AND-COMING DISTRICT

LAKE SUPERIOR



PHOTOS
NICK
WALTON

NICK WALTON EXPLORES THE BACKWATERS OF CAMBODIA'S TONLE SAP LAKE ON THE NEWLY LAUNCHED *AQUA MEKONG* CRUISER, AND DISCOVERS A UNIQUE AQUATIC LANDSCAPE THAT'S BOTH STEEPED IN AUTHENTICITY AND THREATENED BY MODERNITY

AN ELDERLY BUDDHIST MONK SHROUDED IN BRILLIANT CRIMSON ROBES, WREATHED BY A TRIO OF WIDE-EYED NOVICES, CHANTS A BLESSING INCARNATION THAT RESOUNDS ACROSS THE WATER.



MY 26 FELLOW PASSENGERS AND A CLUTCH OF WELL-TRAINED GUIDES KEEP A SHARP VIGIL FOR MIGRATORY BIRDS LIKE THE GREAT EGRET AND INDIAN SHAG



During the wet season – when floodwaters from the Himalayas expand the area of Tonle Sap to 12,000sqkm, making it one of Asia’s largest freshwater lakes – its floating fishing communities retreat to the lake’s banks. During the dry season, when we visit, the lake shrinks to a quarter of that size. Its villages move to deeper water en masse, the flow of the Tonle Sap reversing in a unique hydrodynamic phenomenon that can be witnessed from the ship.

As with the company’s two ships on the Amazon, *Aqua Mekong* is all about exploring beyond familiar seascapes, and its four skiffs offer a better chance than any other vessel on the lake to delve deeper into nature reserves and isolated fishing communities. So it is on our first morning as we glide through the still waters of the 31,282ha Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary, a fundamental component of the UNESCO-recognised Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve, which encompasses Cambodia’s Great Lake. In the shade of the skiff’s canopy, armed with long lenses and *Aqua* thermoses – one of the company’s many real-world green initiatives – my 26 fellow passengers and a clutch of well-trained guides keep a sharp vigil for migratory birds like the great egret and Indian shag. Perched atop trees slowly dying from their guano, Oriental darters parade before us, their outstretched wings drying in the sun, while squadrons of giant pelicans patrol above, their



HOLY MEN OF THE MEKONG
Passengers can visit a floating temple and sit in for a session of chanting

Tonle Sap isn’t a new destination; it’s been on the backpacker route for many years, its lively floating villages the perfect day-trip contrast to the temples of Angkor Wat. But the launch of *Aqua Mekong*, Aqua Expeditions’ newest ship, heralds a new era for the lake and for the Mekong River, on which it cruises on three-, four- and seven-night itineraries between Siem Reap and Ho Chi Minh City. Sleek, intimate and unashamedly modern, *Aqua Mekong* boasts a unique marriage of adventure and comfort, offering travellers a new way to explore this expansive body of water. And it comes at the perfect time, as large-scale hydroelectric projects under construction in northern Cambodia and Laos – and scheduled to come online over the next decade – threaten to alter this unique landscape forever.

Tonle Sap Lake is perfect for expeditionary cruising. A vast, dumbbell-shaped body of water, it’s a crucial ecosystem, and home to over a million people whose lives and livelihoods depend on the seasonal fluctuation of the lake’s waters. ➔



In the floating villages of Cambodia’s Tonle Sap Lake, nothing is permanent; everything ebbs and flows relentlessly with the movement of the life-bringing waters, including this pint-sized floating temple, which rocks back and forth with each bumble bee-like longtail boat that passes. The chanting complete, passengers on the *Aqua Mekong* river cruiser board their modern skiffs and, with a final wave, make for the setting sun. It’s a magical way to end a day on what Cambodians call the “Great Lake”.



LIVING ON THE LAKE
Tonle Sap residents go about their daily business via their wooden boats



BRANCH MANAGERS
 Hunters-turned-rangers now perch in treehouses to protect the sanctuary



Aqua Mekong offers regular three-, four- and seven-night cruises on Tonle Sap Lake from US\$3,000 (S\$3,900) per person, inclusive of all meals, selected beverages, transfers and excursions. aquaexpeditions.com



expansive wingspan allowing them to glide high above the flooded vista with ease.

Under one large, water-encircled tree, we chat with three poachers-turned-rangers – the sanctuary is home to many endangered species, and hunters who once preyed on the migratory visitors now protect them at 36 ranger stations. Armed with rifles and radios, and perched in treehouses for days at a time, the rangers oversee the sanctuary, guarding the many species passing through the submerged forests, especially during the dry season when the number of birds is at its highest. We keep one eye on the trees and another at their base in search of elusive Siamese crocodiles.

The Tonle Sap itinerary is no sedentary cruise; every morning and afternoon there are inclusive expeditions, some to floating villages on cruising recon, others on two feet through bustling villages. In the floating village of Kampong Khleang, children and adults glide through mirror-like waters on traditional longboats. We use GPS to navigate the flooded forests surrounding Moat Kla, where excited children rush to doorways and wave frantically as we cruise by, among the first foreigners they've seen. In tiny Koh Oknha Tey, we visit a local school and take turns to donate stationery supplies and sing with the children, and among the palm plantations of Kampong Chhnamg, we watch Angkorian

pottery being respun and sip palm nectar in the shade. It's cultural immersion with creature comforts.

Of course, it's no hardship returning each evening to a rainshower in one of the 20 David Hodgkinson-designed suites, cocktail hour in the ship's lounge, and Michelin-starred Nahm chef David Thompson's stunning cuisine, which is laced with locally sourced ingredients including Khmer Kampot black pepper, Mekong River catfish and prawns, and fruit from the markets of Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. Afterwards many guests while away the evenings on the open-air decks, marvelling at the beauty of the lake, the chanting of the monks lingering in our ears as they pray for our safety and the prosperity of this unique corner of the world. ★

Travel info ↓



Jetstar flies daily from Singapore to Phnom Penh and four times weekly to Siem Reap.

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