**A Haunting Gallipoli moment**

SUSAN KUROSAWA

It is often people you meet fleetingly when you travel who take up permanent residence in your memory. The unknown elderly Turkish lady, head swathed in a soft pink floral scarf, was such a one.

Twenty years ago, at a time before enthusiastic thronging were heading to Gallipoli to remember the Anzacs landing, I wandered around Lone Pine Cemetery. Twenty years ago, at a time before enthusiastic thronging were heading to Gallipoli to remember the Anzacs landing, I wandered around Lone Pine Cemetery. Twenty years ago, at a time before enthusiastic thronging were heading to Gallipoli to remember the Anzacs landing, I wandered around Lone Pine Cemetery. Twenty years ago, at a time before enthusiastic thronging were heading to Gallipoli to remember the Anzacs landing, I wandered around Lone Pine Cemetery.

Without a word, she reached forward and clasped my hand. Plump, bespectacled and short, she wore her pink floral scarf, was such a one.

Many parts of Asia, such as the inland reaches of Myanmar and the Mekong Delta, are difficult to access.

She called my name. She seemed to expect I would understand, but it was in a language I had never heard before. She was speaking Turkish.

I soon discovered, on both cruises, is that Asian itineraries are not nearly as sedentary as their Europe counterparts. Be prepared for briskwalks, tuk-tuk, bullock wagons, local shallow-draft boats to weave you through floating markets, spirited bargaining, yummy street food and markets where the energy and industriousness all but rises in great puffs of steam. Then back to base camp for that cool lemongrass martini.

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**DEPARTURE LOUNGE**

Full streams ahead

River cruising is now the 21st-century version of coach touring, without the packing and unpacking.

River cruising in Asia is going gangbusters … from the Yangtze to the Mekong, the Ganges to the Ayeyarwady, there is abundant choice and fearsome competition. Many cruise-loving tourists have done the Danube, rivers in Portugal has become one of the latest playgrounds and Avalon Waterways has just announced the Meuse River in Belgium as a new focus. In its 2016 itineraries, in Portugal has become one of the latest playgrounds and Avalon Waterways has just announced the Meuse River in Belgium as a new focus. In its 2016 itineraries, in Portugal has become one of the latest playgrounds and Avalon Waterways has just announced the Meuse River in Belgium as a new focus. In its 2016 itineraries, in Portugal has become one of the latest playgrounds and Avalon Waterways has just announced the Meuse River in Belgium as a new focus. In its 2016 itineraries, in Portugal has become one of the latest playgrounds and Avalon Waterways has just announced the Meuse River in Belgium as a new focus. In its 2016 itineraries.

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**TRAVEL & INDULGENCE**

**LONDON STYLE GUIDE**

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**FLIGHT READING**

*Airfare* of flights from Auckland to Houston;
*Hotel to St Pancras*

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**WHAT IN THE WORLD**

It was an egg mayonnaise sandwich in both directions when T&L flew Virgin Australia between Sydney and Melbourne last weekend but, nonetheless, the provision of complimentary food across the domestic network, plus the addition of no-charge checked baggage and inflight entertainment, elevates the carrier to full-service status • Royal Caribbean Line’s 5000-passenger Ovation of the Seas will be based in Australian waters during summer 2016-17, the megaplaner features a restaurant by Jamie Oliver and unique features including a bumper car circuit, aerial observatory and a Bionic Bar for robot-served cocktails • Air New Zealand has announced direct 777-200 flights from Auckland to Houston from December, it will also commence Buenos Aires services in November • Luke Nguyen’s United Kingdom debut on SBS One on May 14 at 8pm, the 10 half-hour episodes cover a plethora of dishes, from seafood in Cornwall to haggis to Scotland.

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**LEARNING JAPANESE**

How to eat your way through hip new Asian restaurant menus in food & travel in Tuesday’s Life
Marvels of the Mekong

Fifty shades of green, from Cambodia to Vietnam

Susan Kurosawa

In the industry, it’s known as a sampler cruise — just a quick reconnaissance of a river and region, intended to whet passengers’ appetites for more. Sometimes the samplers are repositioning voyages, designed to pop the vessel into a different base port from which to operate the next season of sailings. In my case, it is three days aboard Aqua Mekong, southeast from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City, billed as a “discovery cruise.” It seems a disappointingly short amount of time when there are seven and four-night options on offer. I feel panicked that I will underachieve. How to relax? Will I digest the fine and abiding distinctions of Khmer and Vietnamese cultures? There’ll be barely time to sleep.

Such short voyages typically form the centrepiece of broader explorations and this is how our small group decides we must approach our capsule taste of the Mekong. In Cambodia, we have roamed Siem Reap, explored Angkor Wat, strolled and all but shopped out Phnom Penh. When we reach Ho Chi Minh City, there will be hectic city tours and thrilling Vespa rides and then it’s off to Vietnam’s central coast and high and rocky inland parks. This river and delta interface will be the thread that connects the two countries, that gives us opportunity to absorb and reflect, and to appreciate the importance of the life-giving waters and flourishing agricultural communities of the Mekong.

Aqua Mekong is more floating boutique hotel than conventional river cruiser. Even its blocky glass-walled profile is more suggestive of a building than a boat. The interior design is streamlined and spare, all glossy timbers, chocolatey colours and clever designer details. There are tall arrangements of bright flowers, such as spirea ginger and birds of paradise, and textured rugs and cushions. The 20 suites, ranged across two decks, are a spacious 30sq m and come with either a balcony or indoor daybed nook, from either configuration, the river vistas are immediate, absorbing and dazzling, starting slowly with pale pink sunrises and climaxing with showy orange sunsets.

With a one-to-one staff-to-guest ratio and a maximum of 40 passengers, there is a chunky and chunky feel on board but plenty of tables for two in the dining room if you are not the partying kind. On our cruise, it’s a mix of Australian, American and Brazilian passengers; we mingle over pre-dinner cocktails, chat after the evening tour briefings in the main lounge but then drift in different directions. A small pool at the front of the observation deck, covered by a shade sail, is just the shot for an early-morning dip and I have only small, swooping birds for company. On the final evening our group takes over the cinema to watch Good Morning, Vietnam. The two Cambodian harnen, Nary and Koeminch, make regular checks to ensure the moviegoers’ pisco sour cocktails and pyjama trousers lazings in deckchairs, cooled by electric fans. Later they will spring into action and load hauls of catfish in wicker baskets up and down rickety planks to and from shore.

The pace of a typical Aqua Mekong day starts with a sturdy breakfast, with pastries such as pain au chocolat owing a nod to the French colonial heritage of this region. Did someone mention ricotta hot cakes with banana and honey? Juices are freshly squeezed; fruit ranges beyond the expected to local delicacies such as mangosteens and water apples.

Morning and afternoon excursions shape the daily schedule and take us to temples and villages, heritage house-museums and, best of all, markets such as the big, bustling spread at Tan Chau. It’s tempting to gorge here on “elephant” mangoes that weigh up to an astonishing 10kg and breadfruit the size of bowling balls. We salivate over spoonfuls of pickled papaya straight from the stirring pot; there’s sugarcane tamarind, meaty morrels folded into beet leaves, flat cakes made with popped rice and neatly rolled coconut or ginger candies.

But we Aqua Mekong cruisers agree the food aboard our vessel is so varied and delicious that it is vital to be hungry each mealtime. In Cambodia, we have enjoyed a lunchtime offering of goat’s cheese ravioli with minty Vietnamese but with Western options in the mix, such as a lunchtime offering of goat’s cheese ravioli with burnt butter and pine nuts, and specials based on the catch of the day. Dishes are designed to share, tableware is beautifully decorative, and there’s a crunch and texture to the Asian offerings, in particular, that seems almost virtuous. There’s river prawn phal, pomelo and squid salad, curries humming with chilli and heady with basil, bean curd with spring onions and ginger, sapodillas steeped in coconut cream, and the glorious nursery-sweet creation that is mango and sticky rice.

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stops and sailing and there are options of cycling as well as
skiff rides. We takerickshaws on day one to a Cao Dai
temple at Tan Chau, where worshippers pay homage to
ancestors amid ceiling and walls painted in fluorescent
blue, brass urns and myriad embellishments.

On day two we put families in the nine-guest settle-
ment of My An Hung and are treated to an “afternoon
fruit tea” of “hot and cooling” varieties, including thin-
skinned mandarins, guavas, longans and that devilish
durian. As we dip shoes into bowls of lime-drenched
white pepper, long-legged herons fly low over surround-
ing fish farms. Tuyen shows us “heaven-pointing chillies”
and water spinach thriving in the rich, dark soil. From
shoulder-high reeds young children suddenly appear in
great gusts of laughter, vying with each other to be the
first to practise saying “hello” and “welcome”. We feel en-
veloped in 50 shades of green — dense, cooling, luxuriant
and life-giving.

Then, as we sit in obedient rows inside a village house,
a handsome man in his 60s plucks reedy notes on a one-
strunged dan bau for us while his wife warbles in a high soprano that
scurries small birds from the rafters.

Every time we reboard Aqua Mekong, the spa attend-
ants materialise at the gangway with trays of coconut
water and chilled towels scented with jasmine. Our dusty
walking shoes are tagged and taken away for cleaning.
Most of us head for showers and quick lie-downs, do-met-
disturb beads popped onto suite door handles. As we set-
tle back on the watermelon crush enlivened with a blast
of barley vodka, a squeeze of lime and a pinch of sea salt,
many of an entertainment troupe board and as-
semble in the main lounge. As they perform barefooted
dances with names such as Golden Mermaid, their
movements seem weightless and their expressive, slow-
moving hands tell of fishing fables and enduring village
stories. Costumes glisten and sparkle. We are mesmer-
ised and humbled by such serenity and grace.

By the end of day two, the captain announces that we
have sailed 275km downriver from Phnom Penh. It has
been far too quick. My Tho, our port for Ho Chi Minh
City, is within our sights. Soon we will board a bus racing
to Vietnam’s energy-packed gateway city. Would I do it
again? Oh, yes, in a jiff and a skiff.

A handsome man in his 60s plucks reedy notes
on a dan bau
while his wife
warbles in
a high
soprano
that
scurries small birds

Aqua Mekong is more floating boutique hotel than river cruiser,
left; the lounge and bar, above; skiffs are used for shore
excursions, below; Mekong Delta markets are hives of industry
and fresh food, right and below right

Checklist

There is a minimum age of seven years for children on board.
Four pairs of interconnecting suites are suitable for families.
Suites on the upper deck are slightly more expensive but hardly
worth the extra as all accommodation is of an
identical standard. Choose a balcony only if you want fresh
air and outdoor lounging (way too hot to enjoy during my
March cruise). Upriver and downriver itineraries are for
seven, four or three nights. The fare includes all meals, non-
alcoholic beverages and selected wines and beers, laundry,
Wi-Fi access, excursions and use of bikes. Cocktails are
$11.58 and massages in the spa are reasonably priced. There
are also a gym and a library. Aqua Expeditions also operates
the 16-suite Aria Amazon and 12-suite Aqua Amazon in
offers three-night Aqua Mekong cruises between Phnom
Penh and Ho Chi Minh City from $US3315 ($4235) a person
twin-share. A nine-night Journey on the Mekong features
two nights in Ho Chi Minh City with private transfers,
private city sightseeing tour and a seven-night Aqua
Mekong cruise, from $US11,220 a person twin-share.