

THE MIND THAT MADE MERCEDES F1 CHAMP

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Mystical River

Having pioneered luxury riverboat cruises on the Amazon, Francesco Galli Zugaro's *Aqua Mekong*—a 20-suite vessel that features an award-winning chef, a spa and a movie theater—brings glamour to the Mekong River.

BY RICHARD NALLEY

Dark clouds—the last of the year's monsoons—stack overhead as our skiff shreds the watery main street of northern Cambodia's Chong Kneas, an exuberantly painted floating village of makeshift houses, grocery barges and at least one bobbing Catholic church, a prim pale blue amid the oranges and umbers. As we round a final bend into the Tonle Sap, a lake swollen to the size of Delaware by the fall rains, the *Aqua Mekong* heaves into view, a wall of twinkling lights, surreal in the sunset, an unmoored vision of urban cool.

"This isn't a cruise ship," proclaims *Aqua Expeditions* founder and CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro once we are aboard, "but a world-class boutique hotel with settings that change every day." And they don't stint on the welcome. We are greeted that first day, as we will be every time we reboard, by a flock of uniformed crew members proffering trays of fruit juices and tonging up frozen towels against the tropical heat.

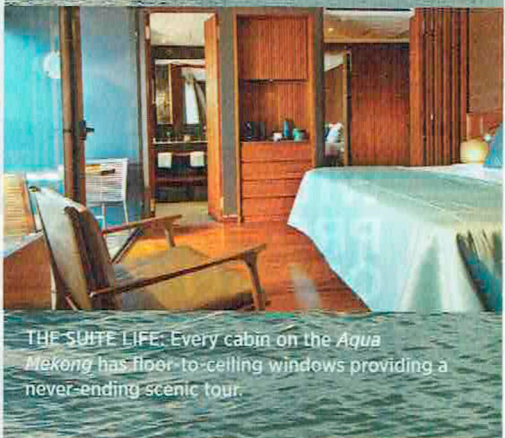
There are 40 of them tending to no more than 40 guests on this small ship, with its walls of floor-to-ceiling windows, muted earth tones and no-concession-to-the-surroundings amenities.

Do you demand a pelting rain forest shower with instant hot water on a remote Mekong River estuary? Or your menu prepared by David Thompson, whose *naam* in Bangkok was named the best restaurant in Asia in the 2014 San Pellegrino awards? Or perhaps a far-off-the-grid high-speed Wi-Fi connection? (Admittedly, Galli Zugaro is still tinkering with that last one.) But our late October trip was, after all, the *Aqua Mekong's* first week on the river—this a four-night leg from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh—with paying customers. (Rates for a four-night trip begin at \$4,420 per person, double occupancy, all inclusive.)

Six years earlier I had seen the charismatic, cosmopolitan Galli Zugaro in a very different setting when he launched the first of his two game-changing *Aqua Expeditions* boats in Peru. It had been



WATERFRONT DINING: *Aqua Mekong* chef David Thompson interprets traditional Thai and Cambodian cuisine, including a *kham bueang*.



THE SUITE LIFE: Every cabin on the *Aqua Mekong* has floor-to-ceiling windows providing a never-ending scenic tour.

a grueling, cash-hemorrhaging process to get that first luxury ship onto the Amazon River with a suitable crew and itinerary. One can only imagine the dinner table conversation at the Galli Zugaro household when he broached his next dream: uprooting his very comfortably ensconced family from Lima, relocating them to Singapore, then heading off himself to scour the shipyards of Vietnam and reboot the whole process from scratch.

The 40-year-old Galli Zugaro is nothing if not ambitious. Though built



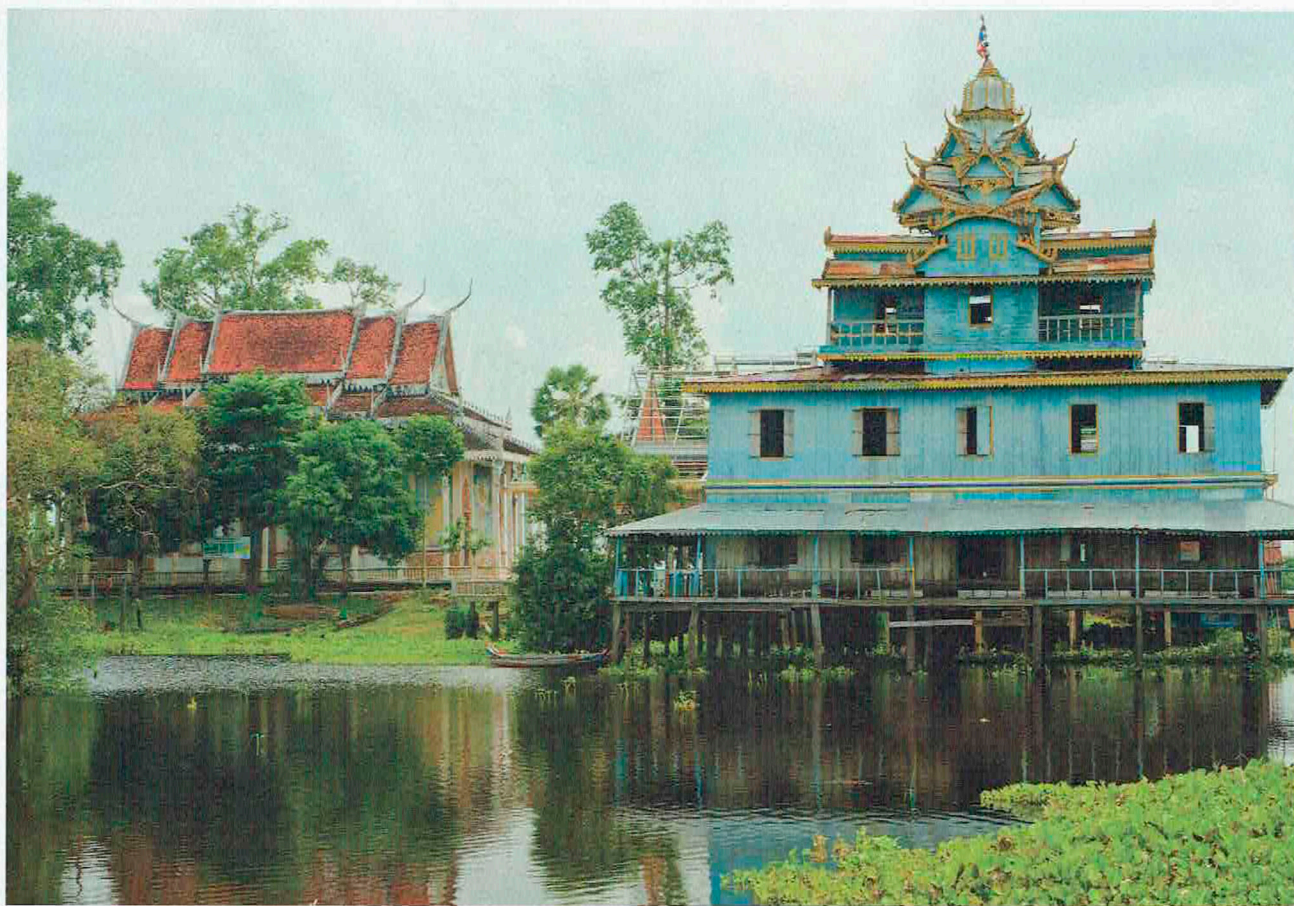
along the same essential shallow-draft, sheer-sided, floating-hotel lines, the *Aqua Mekong* is larger than the Amazon ships—20 suites instead of 6 or 8—and even more lavish, adding in a plunge pool, spa, gym and screening room. The trip formula is also similar: The ship's Bimini-topped skiffs pull around to the gangway in the morning to take you on tour, return you for an elaborate lunch and siesta, then take you out again in the afternoon. (The *Aqua Mekong* also pulls off one of the most welcome tricks of the Amazon boats: As you are

returning in the skiff, sweat-ringed and tucked out, with the tropical night falling, the boat has moved to meet you, suddenly materializing around a bend, lights ablaze, like a cozy inn in the deep boondocks.)

The world of difference here of course is that the Mekong River is not the Amazon. And unlike Aqua Expeditions' Peru voyages, this is not a wildlife viewing trip. (As Galli Zugaro puts it: "When people see anything move here, they eat it.") Instead, the trump cards are the Mekong itinerary's bookends,

the sprawling temple and palace complexes of Angkor (which Galli Zugaro calls "the Machu Picchu of Asia") at one end, and the lovely, still sleepy Phnom Penh—or Saigon on the later leg—at the other.

The slow float downriver from the medieval capital of Angkor, outside Siem Reap, to the modern capital, can be seen as the figurative procession of Cambodian history itself. It is a long and—so it seems to an outsider—mostly tragic past to have produced such welcoming, open-hearted people. At the



ruins of Angkor, you are embedded in the grand-scale flowering of Khmer culture between the 9th and 15th centuries. That vast, wealthy empire crumbled rather suddenly in a perfect storm of natural and political disasters, and was sacked in 1431 by a group from present-day Thailand.

But the watershed catastrophe of Khmer history was self-inflicted. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge controlled the country for only four years in the late 1970s, yet wiped out an estimated one-quarter of Cambodia's entire population, displaced countless others and retreated into the jungle to wage nearly 20 more years of guerrilla war that—along with a decade of occupation by the Vietnamese—left behind a traumatized nation.

A generation later the great charm and beauty of today's Cambodia is still

shaded by these events. And as the *Aqua Mekong's* skiffs deliver you to villages far in the flooded hinterlands, you feel the far-reaching economic repercussions in a society with a scant toe-hold, or none at all, in the 21st century.

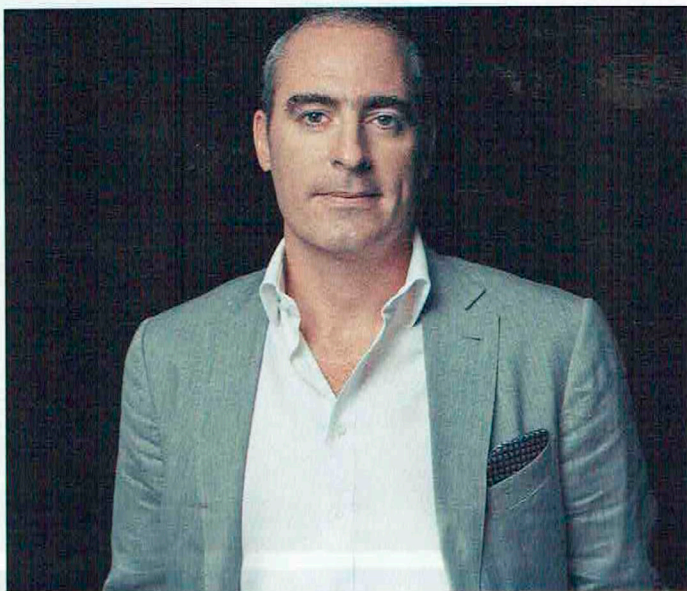
For passengers on the posh ship, it creates an Inside the Hull/Outside the Hull dichotomy that may be more or less disquieting depending on how attuned you are to other cultures' versions of joy and satisfaction.

Inside the Hull, you are cosseted in a 205-foot-long, three-floor floating luxury experience. Chef Thompson happened to be aboard the whole four nights I was. A fashionably disheveled, sardonic Australian, he brought his culinary A-game to a remarkable range of foods, from thin-crust pizza to his signature Thai dishes—piles of peppery crab, salty-sweet squid, bang chok

noodles—and simple preparations like a breakfast rice pudding that lifts off the plate thanks to its ingredients and seasoning.

After dinner you might repair to the top-deck lounge, with its wrap-glass panoramas and remarkable artisan-spirit-stocked bar, staffed by mixologists from Singapore's Proof & Co. There may even be a show outside in the dark—tropical lightning flickering behind massed clouds—as you sip a nightcap from the alchemical cocktail menu, a Kentucky Cha Chuck, perhaps, blending Rowan's Creek Bourbon with Thai tea prepared “street vendor style.”

Three decks down, I plunked one afternoon for a massage in the blond-wood-and-gray-silk spa. My masseuse, a tiny woman called Ath with the smile of an angel and a grip like a pit bull's jaws, pummeled the hell out of me for



KING MEKONG: Aqua Expeditions CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro replicated the luxurious riverboat experience he created along the Amazon. Left: a temple on the Tonle Sap lake.

an hour, much of that time spent crawling about on my back. I am no great connoisseur of massage, but it was the finest I've had anywhere. I emerged a humbled man, yes, but also transcendently uncoiled, lighter of step and perhaps slightly taller and longer of limb.

Outside the Hull, by contrast, the *Aqua Mekong* serves up a quiet, steady diet of soul. And the crew does a deft, gentle job of prepping you for it. One predinner talk in the lounge consisted almost entirely of an etiquette lecture, including the various levels of *sampeah*, the steeple-fingered handclap and bow that is the Cambodian equivalent of Thailand's *wai* (hands at midchest for friends, by the way, all the way up to forehead height should you encounter the Buddha himself).

Once you've put the spectacle of Angkor Wat behind and embarked on the waterways, there isn't a single showstopper excursion on the Cambodian leg of the trip. Rather, the *Aqua Mekong* provides a layered accumulation of moments, people, textures of life. We spent a morning tooling about

a vast, flooded bird sanctuary on the Tonle Sap, its population of snake-necked Oriental Darters, fish eagles and Indian Shags on the rebound thanks to recently stepped-up enforcement from rangers like those we visit living high above the water on a platform in the mangrove branches. By boat, bicycle and *tuk-tuk*, we also visit silk weavers working bewilderingly complex hand looms, potters for whom a wheel would be an unwelcome dose of modern frippery and a village of silversmiths stoking forge fires in clay ovens. You can hear their hammering, hammering far away up the river.

Beaching the skiffs at the river town of Koh Oknha Tey, we climb a muddy red clay bank to drop in on an English class at the local elementary school. We each choose a child to read with—or rather the children choose us—and pore over the coloring books and primers these honor students have been awarded as prizes. At the end they sing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” and “If You're Happy and You Know It.” We sing and dance, badly, “The Hokey Pokey.”

Later we dock at a floating temple

and receive the monks' benediction for our onward journey. We putter through prosperous-seeming stilt villages, their broad main streets under 20 feet of water during this season (and bone-dry by spring), the heavy air pungent with charcoal fires and wafting layers of smoky, elemental fishy funkiness from the fermenting fish paste each family bottles to see it through the dry months.

South out of the Tonle Sap, the view outside your stateroom window changes from green, jungly banks to jostling towns, with temple spires or the occasional gold-domed mosque rising from a throng of makeshift dwellings, each seeming to lean upon the next. North of the capital, the river becomes thronged with clouds of sampans and barges and narrow, brightly painted wooden fishing boats with raised prows and sterns.

The city of Phnom Penh may not exactly be, as advertised—“The Paris of the Orient”—but it is full of charm, with lovely museums, warrens of marketplaces and the kind of vital street life that has all too often been erased in other Asian capitals. Flying from there through Seoul, a lovely city in its own right, was a greater contrast than flying from New York to Siem Reap. The Phnom Penh of quaint government offices (“The Ministry of Industry and Handicrafts”) and narrow streets choked with motorbikes, *tuk-tuks* and cyclos, was not just a different face of Asia from Seoul's glinting high-rises and intimidating six-lane traffic but a page from a different storybook, a tale about different prospects entirely.

The *Aqua Mekong's* deftly guided journey through the heart of Cambodia slips you, for a few compressed days, into the pages of that less accessible, more unfamiliar story. And in the end the greatest privilege is being delivered Outside the Hull, amid the forges and fish paste, the sounds and smells of lives still deeply rooted in the local, in an interconnected age. **F**

Adapted from *ForbesLife*.