

Condé Nast Traveller

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THE EDITORS' LIST

Winter
sunshine

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From the Khmer Apsara dance performance on the first night – an indigenous tradition memorialised on the temple walls at Angkor Wat – to meeting the all-local team on board, it becomes immediately obvious that this five-day round trip along the Mekong River from Phnom Penh is a real under-the-skin experience. The slick design of the *Aqua Mekong*, which only sails through Cambodia and Vietnam, is inspired by Khmer and Vietnamese architecture. The 20 vast suites have floor-to-ceiling windows and include a day bed, dark wood panelling and beautifully woven textiles (the interiors are made entirely from materials found along the river). There is a plunge pool on deck, a lounge bar with

slate-grey sofas and planter-style chairs, a library, a cinema and an indulgent spa.

At each stop we're right in the heart of rural life. We visit Koh Chen village to meet artisans, who produce silverware loved by Khmer royalty, and take tuk-tuks into the countryside to a traditional pottery, where I buy several stunning, green oversized ceramic pots with no thought as to how I'll get them home. Among the rice paddies in Kampong Chhnang, where the main trade is palm sugar, we watch a 70-year-old man run up a precarious 40-foot tree, disappear into the leaves and then scuttle back down with his prized fruit while curious children play around us. And in Oudong, the former royal capital, we see Buddhists meditating at the Vipassana Dhura Mandala centre.

Before dinner each night, our knowledgeable guides, who are so passionate about their

country, give us a talk on its history and the current political climate, which inevitably spills into lively round-the-table conversation. The fine dining menu is designed by Australian chef and restaurateur David Thompson (until earlier this year, he headed up Michelin-starred Bangkok restaurant Nahm), with ingredients bought fresh at the riverside markets. Dishes include Fish Amok (fillets marinated in a lemongrass paste and steamed in a banana leaf basket), crab red curry, and for dessert Taro-style dumplings in coconut milk and ginger sauce.

One of the high points of the trip is visiting a Buddhist temple, where we speak to a pair of monks, who then bless us individually and give out good faith bracelets. Afterwards, a speedboat whisks us off to a sandy stretch of riverbank where a makeshift bar has been set up, just in time for sunset. It's the perfect moment to reflect on a trip that offers an incredible chance to delve deeper into this fascinating country.



Above: a suite aboard the *Aqua Mekong*.
Below: a monk at one of the region's Buddhist temples

AQUA EXPEDITIONS

Aqua Expeditions offers three- to seven-night cruises on *Aqua Mekong*, from about £3,000 per person based on two sharing a design suite, including meals, a selection of drinks and excursions. Visit aquaxpeditions.com or call +65 6270 4002

Cambodia

From meditating monks to palm fruit pickers, get the inside track on the Mekong

PHNOM PENH KOH CHEN KAMPONG PRASAT KAMPONG CHHNANG KAMPONG TRALACH KOH OKNHA TEY PREAH PROSOP PHNOM PENH