

LIFE . EXTRAORDINARY

# SINGAPORE TATTLE R

May 2019

## NEW HEIGHTS

How does property scion Kishin RK  
plan to shape the future of real estate?

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MEET THE YOUNG TASTEMAKERS  
POWERING THE LUXURY ECONOMY





## TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

How a recent trip up the Mekong with chef David Thompson made *Daven Wu* a convert in the world of luxury cruises

Not so long ago, this is how I travelled: I'd always be in a tearing rush to get from one city to the other in the fastest, most efficient way. But then somewhere along the line, I discovered ship cruises. I loved it and found I was in good company. Now, after a recent trip up the Mekong on the Aqua Mekong from Ho Chi Minh City to Phnom Penh, I've become a convert to the luxury segment of small to medium-sized vessels, joining an entirely new niche market of luxury travellers who are looking for a more intimate and enriching experience.

And why not? Why deal with crowded cities, pushy boards of tourists and bad traffic when you could, for instance, be on the 20-suite Aqua Mekong with its fleet of four private tenders for twice-daily excursions to fishing villages, temples, and wildlife sanctuaries? Where—in addition to a library, games room, a sprawling lounge and bar, and a movie screening room with deeply comfortable reclining leather chairs—the bedrooms, some with spacious balconies, are lined in warm textiles, generously proportioned bathrooms and come with daily complimentary laundry. Where your shoes are whisked off to be cleaned after you return

from an excursion. And where the staff to guest ratio is one-to-one.

It's a floating five-star hotel. It's *Downman Abbey* on the Mekong. And to top it off, we had notable chef David Thompson—a Lifetime Achievement Award recipient at Asia's 50 Best in 2016—on board as our official host.

### CASUAL LUXE

Gastronomically, I came of age in mid-90s Australia when Thompson first burst into the culinary scene with his now legendary Darley Street Thai in Sydney. And over the years, I've admired him from a distance—whether at Nahm in London and Bangkok (which he left early 2018), or Long Chim in Perth and Singapore (which shuttered this year).

What a thrill then to discover that, somehow, Francesco Galli Zagaro, the CEO and founder of Aqua Expeditions—the company behind the 62.4m-long Aqua Mekong—had convinced Thompson to host, beginning in 2018, two yearly trips along the river.

Thompson has no airs. He slips quietly into the timber-lined dining room and slides into a banquet booth with whoever is fortunate enough to have his company for that meal. For those who are aware of who he is, he

### FULL SERVICE

(Clockwise from top) On the writer's trip, occupancy was about half, which meant 40 staff were looking after twenty guests; fresh prawns with local herbs; and a simple dish of sea bass in a "three-flavour" sauce

patiently fields questions about Thai cuisine, its history and the restaurant business. For those who aren't, he entertains with dry bon mots and anecdotes.

One afternoon, after the ship's sous chef demonstrates a Vietnamese *bahn xeo*, it's Thompson's turn. "I'm just going to do a silly Thai salad which will be a joke compared to the sophistication of what you've just seen," he announces.

But his feint is revealed as he slices and chops green mango and star fruit, long-leafed coriander and green beans. His technique is quiet and expert. Nothing flashy, just clear evidence of a lifetime spent in the kitchen. He chats the whole time about the vegetables and fruit in the region. Casually, he mixes tamarind, soy and palm sugar. Like your great aunt in the kitchen, he measures nothing. "Taste what you're cooking and adjust the seasonings. The flavour of ingredients vary with the season. And for this salad, you put in enough palm sugar to send you into a diabetic spin," he deadpans.

### EXPERT ADVICE

On another afternoon, we board our skiff and jet off to the Vietnamese town of Sa Dec to visit the crumbling, atmospheric home of Marguerite Duras's lover, the one so dramatically portrayed by Tony Leung in the softly erotic movie *The Lover*. From there, we wander through the wet market with Thompson, admiring the vats of freshwater eel, baskets of baby ducklings and chicks,



IMAGES: AQUA MEKONG



The attraction of smaller boats has another dimension besides fewer guests, better food and more intimate excursions led by knowledgeable experts: their size enables them to venture deeper into narrower waterways

mounds of red shallots, long-leafed corianders and apple eggplants, listening to him recall his early encounters with Thai food.

If my four-night stay onboard the Aqua Mekong proved anything, it is that the attraction of smaller boats has another dimension besides fewer guests, better food and more intimate excursions led by knowledgeable experts: their size enables them to venture deeper into narrower waterways. In Asia, at least, this relative accessibility to smaller ports and destinations is introducing literally new vistas to a whole new generation of seafaring travellers, not least a younger, more cashed-up corps of retirees, and a more mobile senior workforce who can stay connected to the office and finesse the spreadsheet, while nursing a Negroni by the Aqua Mekong's top-deck plunge pool.

As Zagaro puts it, river cruisers are the fastest growing segment today. "Our multi-generational clientele wants authentic adventures and daily curated excursions. But they don't want to sacrifice their creature comforts," he affirms.

In other words: graceful, unhurried, calmly, and in luxury. In case I've not been clear enough, if the Crawleys of *Downman Abbey* had ever come to Asia for their summer holidays, this is how they would have travelled. By any yardstick, it's a delicious treat. ■

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## How a recent trip up the Mekong with chef David Thompson made *Daven Wu* a convert in the world of luxury cruises

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