

**TRAVEL** *HOME*  
*STRETCH*

Floating along on the Mekong is the best way to discover South-East Asia's rich heritage and natural wonders.

By Lee Tulloch Photographed by Elise Hassey

**THIS PAGE** the majesty of the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam. **OPPOSITE PAGE** the Victory Gate at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



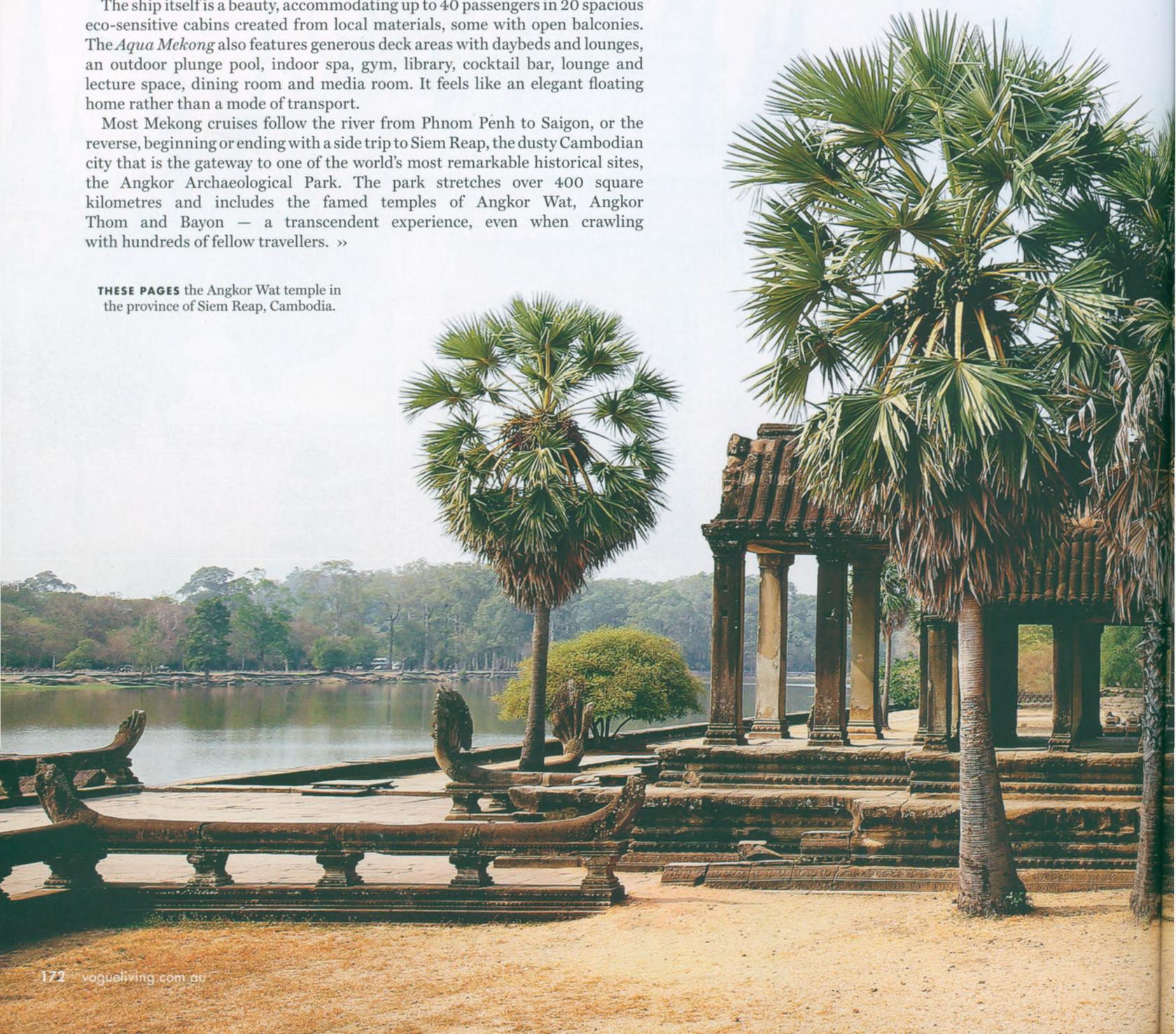
**T**he Mekong river flows from the Tibetan plateau, through Yunnan province in China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia to Vietnam, a journey that goes through the heart of many striking landscapes and cultures. In the Mekong Delta alone, where the river branches into tributaries and spreads its fingers through Cambodia and Vietnam, there are 22 million people living in its 13 provinces. And yet, viewed from the upper deck of *Aqua Mekong* in golden dawn light, the wide river is majestically tranquil, as fishing boats and sampans putter across its brown surface through drifts of wild water hyacinths.

The *Aqua Mekong* was something of a trendsetter when it was launched in 2014 with one-to-one crew-to-guest ratios, contemporary interiors by Saigon-based Noor Design, and the coup of having celebrated chef David Thompson supervise the ship's superb pan-Asian menus — Thai, Khmer, Vietnamese — which are created using local seafood and produce and served shared-plate style.

The ship itself is a beauty, accommodating up to 40 passengers in 20 spacious eco-sensitive cabins created from local materials, some with open balconies. The *Aqua Mekong* also features generous deck areas with daybeds and lounges, an outdoor plunge pool, indoor spa, gym, library, cocktail bar, lounge and lecture space, dining room and media room. It feels like an elegant floating home rather than a mode of transport.

Most Mekong cruises follow the river from Phnom Penh to Saigon, or the reverse, beginning or ending with a side trip to Siem Reap, the dusty Cambodian city that is the gateway to one of the world's most remarkable historical sites, the Angkor Archaeological Park. The park stretches over 400 square kilometres and includes the famed temples of Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom and Bayon — a transcendent experience, even when crawling with hundreds of fellow travellers. >>

**THESE PAGES** the Angkor Wat temple in the province of Siem Reap, Cambodia.





« We spent two days in Siem Reap before flying to Phnom Penh, an underrated city of two million people that's modern and frenetic in some ways, but delightfully laid-back in others. An emotional visit to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, housed in the old S-21 jail, provided context for the horrific history of the Cambodian Civil War of 1975-1979. To cruise on the Mekong is to acknowledge the turbulent histories of Cambodia and Vietnam, and marvel at the indomitable spirit of the river people.

Days onboard involved optional morning and afternoon excursions, history talks and cultural performances. Many Mekong cruises offer this, but a point of difference with the *Aqua Mekong* is the two racy skiffs on hand to take guests gliding along the river, directly to villages and markets such as the chaotic floating market at Binh Thanh, allowing us to experience river life close-up.

There are bicycles available for the energetic but the sybaritic (me) opt for a daybed on the top deck or the plunge pool as the verdant rice paddies and orchards drift by. The Mekong isn't always pristine, to put it mildly, with plenty of industry flourishing along the banks — but it is always hypnotic.

We disembarked in Ho Chi Minh City, with its roads choked with trucks and seven million motor scooters. The Mekong, even at its most congested, seems like a lyrical dream compared to this.

Aqua Expeditions also operates the *Aria Amazon* and, has recently rolled out two new fleet additions, *Aqua Blu*, a coastal ship that will explore multiple destinations in East Indonesia, and *Aqua Nera* on the Peruvian Amazon. **VL** *Aqua Mekong* operates three-, four- and seven-night Expedition Cruises through Vietnam and Cambodia. [aquaexpeditions.com](http://aquaexpeditions.com)

## The Mekong, three ways

### SET SAIL

The Mekong's newest ship, *Avalon Saigon*, and her sister ship, *Avalon Siem Reap*, follow the Mekong all the way from Siem Reap to Ho Chi Minh City (or the reverse), rather than coach passengers to the dock, a point of difference from other cruises. Each ship has only 18 suites, with panoramic windows that open to form a large, airy balcony and a "beds with a view" cabin design that allows guests to linger in bed while the riverbanks glide by. [avalonwaterways.com.au](http://avalonwaterways.com.au)

### NEW FRONTIERS

For more adventurous travellers, the popular South-East Asia river cruise specialist Pandaw Cruises is pioneering 14-day itineraries along the upper Mekong. The 14-stateroom *RV Sabaiidee* has been specially designed with extra engine power to navigate the rapids of the Laos

gorges, in a journey that takes guests from Vientiane in Laos, through Thailand and Myanmar, to Jinghong in Yunnan province, China, traversing the remotest parts of four different countries. Expect the excitement of white water rapids and villages that seem lost in time. [pandaw.com](http://pandaw.com)

### PERSONAL SPIN

Vietnamese-Australian chef Luke Nguyen is an ambassador for Australian-owned APT and is hosting Signature experiences on APT cruise itineraries on both the Mekong and the rivers of regional France. The Mekong itinerary begins in Ho Chi Minh City for a morning walk through the local markets with Luke, followed by a cooking class at his culinary school, Grain, and dinner at his restaurant Vietnam House. We can't think of a better guide to the region's culinary pleasures than the personable chef. [aptouring.com.au](http://aptouring.com.au)



THIS PAGE life on the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.