

delicious.

OTTOLENGHI'S FAST FISH CAKES

MEAL MAKEOVERS!

- HOW TO SPICE UP FRIED RICE
- PREP-AHEAD MASTERCLASS
- HETTY MCKINNON'S LOADED SALADS
- JORDAN TOFT'S CHILLI-BUTTER MUD CRAB

(PLUS 8 OF THE BEST NEW BROWNIE RECIPES EVER...)

EASY UPDATE:
Serve with ginger & Thai basil yoghurt

+
BONUS
CRUISE
TRAVEL
GUIDE



MATT STONE & JO BARRETT
No-waste apricot pie



SILVIA COLLOCA
Next-level cotoletta



COLIN FASSNIDGE
Pork 'n' slaw

RIVER CRUISE.

DELTA

The Mekong River surges like a life-force through Southeast Asia. On-board the luxury Aqua Mekong



HUES

from Vietnam to Cambodia, **Melissa Leong** revels in the beauty and culture of the region.

PHOTOGRAPHY LUISA BRIMBLE



A fisherman casts his net into the Mekong River.

When you hear the words 'boat cruise', you'd be forgiven for visualising a holiday situation involving shuffleboard, cramped quarters, a certain type of traveller and, most likely, an all-you-can-eat buffet. As a person who enjoys their personal space, the freedom to decide on the day what I want to do, and really, really good food, especially when on holiday, the idea of taking a cruise has never really been on my radar. Having said that, the best part of a travel writer's gig is being open to experiences outside of our own predilections, and it's bloody marvellous when a trip changes your perspective entirely.

When an invitation to sail down the Mekong River with renowned Australian chef David Thompson comes knocking, you have to set aside any bias toward cruising and just say yes. The Aqua Mekong luxury cruise sails the Mekong River between My Tho in Vietnam and Phnom Penh, Cambodia, or Siem Reap in the high season, when the river is high enough to accommodate. For the past five years, Thompson has consulted on the menu and culinary program on board. A handful of times a year, travellers are even lucky enough to have him accompany them on their journey: a compelling proposition for any food-loving traveller.

This trip is all about life on the river, but it really begins as the plane descends into Ho Chi Minh. From the air, the milk-tea-hued Mekong River and its tributaries unfurl like ribbons into the landscape. And from this lofty perch, you already start to get a

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feel for the significance the river holds, for the lives, produce and economy of the regions it flows through.

Our party gathers for fancy refreshments at The Park Hyatt, where the dial on this trip is apparently already set to 'luxury'. A look around the room at my companions for the next five days shows a diverse group of well-heeled travellers of all ages from across the globe, who are all as keen as I am to get this show on the road. Or, should I say, on the water. Two hours later, at the port of My Tho, we first encounter our home for the next few days. With its sleek lines and low-key-luxe colour palette of warm wood, matte gunmetal and crisp white, the Aqua Mekong feels more like a floating high-end boutique hotel than anyone's antiquated conception of cruise boat: Captain Stubing definitely doesn't work here.

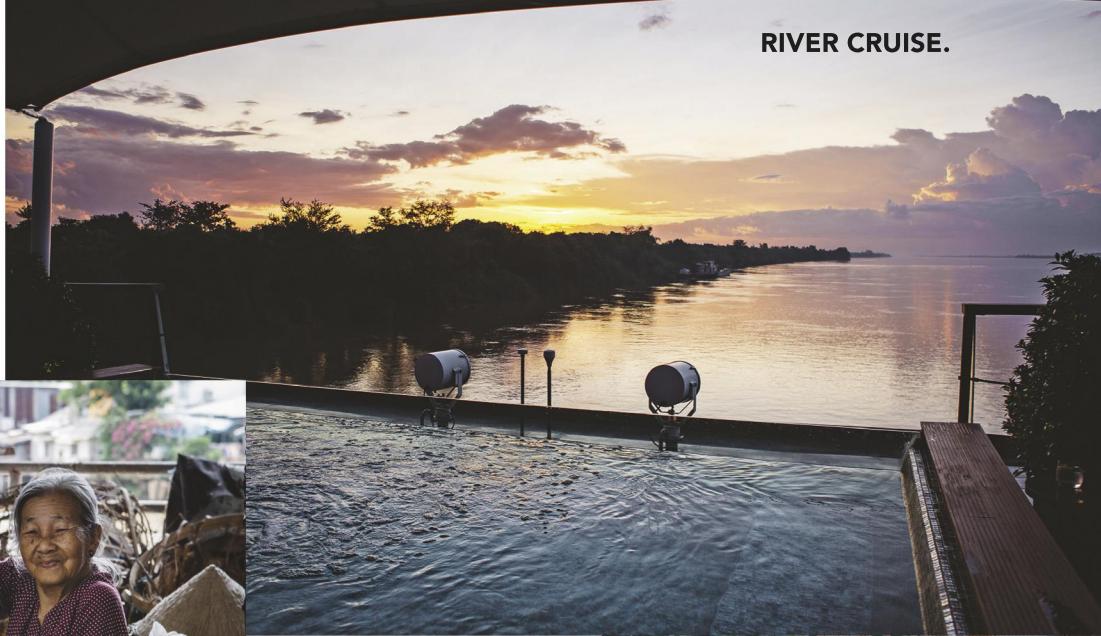
The perspective shift is already in motion, with a day-spa-like welcome of cool, scented towels, fresh tropical juice, and smiles all round from the crew. A tour of the boat reveals well-appointed indoor and outdoor spaces, from the airy bar and lounge, rooftop cabanas and plunge pool, to games and movie screening rooms, a day spa, gym and the light-filled dining room.



Life on the
Mekong River



RIVER CRUISE.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Aqua Mekong's deck-top
plunge pool; David Thompson
(inset); Aqua Mekong is more
akin to a floating high-end
boutique hotel; the ship's
light-filled dining room;
gourmet offerings are inspired
by the region.





RIVER CRUISE.



The ship's interiors are refined and luxurious, featuring cosy corners to watch the river, expansive suites and plush bathrooms.



But there's no bunking down in cosy cabins on this trip. There are just 20 spaciously modern suites on board, complete with floor-to-ceiling windows, polished floorboards and plenty of nooks to curl up in while you watch life float by. It's all very modern and high-end, but in between bouts of relaxation in such sexy surrounds, you gotta eat.

Thompson is keen for us to experience the menu, which changes to reflect the cuisine of the regions we will sail through, from fragrant Vietnamese, to the gentler subtleties of Cambodian food. In the beginning, the on-board menu focused more on the vibrant and dynamic Thai cuisine Thompson is globally renowned for, but DT fans needn't be disappointed. While the menu changes to reflect the changing landscape (with a few Western comforts thrown in for good measure), it maintains his uncompromising commitment to flavour, incredible produce and multi-dimensional dining experiences.

"The menu changes often, and so it should, because you see that's the evolving nature of a cruise; it can't petrify. I think the most important thing [we've done to evolve the menu over the years] is that we started to employ some of the home recipes of [our kitchen team]," says Thompson.

"I asked the guys what they remember eating at home. They're emotionally invested because everyone is from somewhere [along this Mekong route], and it's real for them. It is fitting as we follow the Mekong, to be eating the food from the Mekong," he adds.

Drawing from the home recipes of head chef Sophal and sous chef Phalla, strikes as a smarter and more contextual approach, and deepens not only the experience of travelling through such a culturally rich part of the world, but also connects travellers to the committed and wonderful crew, who are proud of their heritage. Whether Thompson is on-board or not, the kitchen team maintain a passion for communicating their culture through food, which adds another dimension to the experience.

Each day, there's a changing menu of nourishing congee, cooked-to-order wok-tossed noodles, textbook-perfect omelettes and Continental classics for breakfast. Lunch offerings include comforting noodle soups, fresh salads, generous and aromatic family-style Vietnamese or Khmer banquets, while dinner is all about alfresco barbecues. As a result, it's easy to see how food becomes a delicious highlight to punctuate each day.

"THE KITCHEN TEAM MAINTAIN A PASSION FOR COMMUNICATING THEIR CULTURE THROUGH FOOD."

If you think you're boat-bound for the duration of the trip, think again. Each day, there is a choice of activities in the morning and afternoon that transport you from the Aqua Mekong via one of four speed boats on board. These pocket rockets propel you into fringes of life along the river in style. From bike-riding through local villages, tuk tuks to temples, stunning palaces and even a heartbreakingly cute visit to a local primary school, there's no shortage of options, if you want to mix some action with your rigorous relaxation program.

Thompson takes a group of us to a produce market in the nearby town of Sa Đéc, so we can get a feel for the diversity of local produce in the region. From a rainbow of fruit and vegetable produce, like golden pea flowers sticky with nectar, fuzzy, blushing rambutans and verdant wing beans, there are also local fish, snails, frogs and eels being sold by smiling women. Dressed in colourful clashing patterns, these accidental fashionistas, their smiles and their wares, are a regular highlight as we continue to roll down the river.

Back on the boat, those willing to test their knife skills can partake in a cooking class with Thompson, where you'll learn to slice kaffir lime leaves like a pro, or at least learn how to master filling and sealing a rice paper roll, before you get to eat it. Bonus points if you can do it with a cocktail in the other hand.

Stopping in at Châu Đốc, a Vietnamese town bordering Cambodia in An Giang Province, the speciality here is fermented fish of all kinds. We snack on sticky sweet tamarind pods and crunchy banana fritters while we take in the clangsing hustle of the market. A hub for Cambodians and Vietnamese from all over the region, it's a meeting point for friends, family and travellers, to slurp

down a bowl of steaming, spicy bun bo hue, or pick up supplies for the week ahead. These speedboat trips down narrower tributaries allow a closer look at daily life in the Mekong Delta, from floating fish farms, boats ferrying sand to and from dredging sites, and buffalo bathing in the shallows.



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RIVER CRUISE.



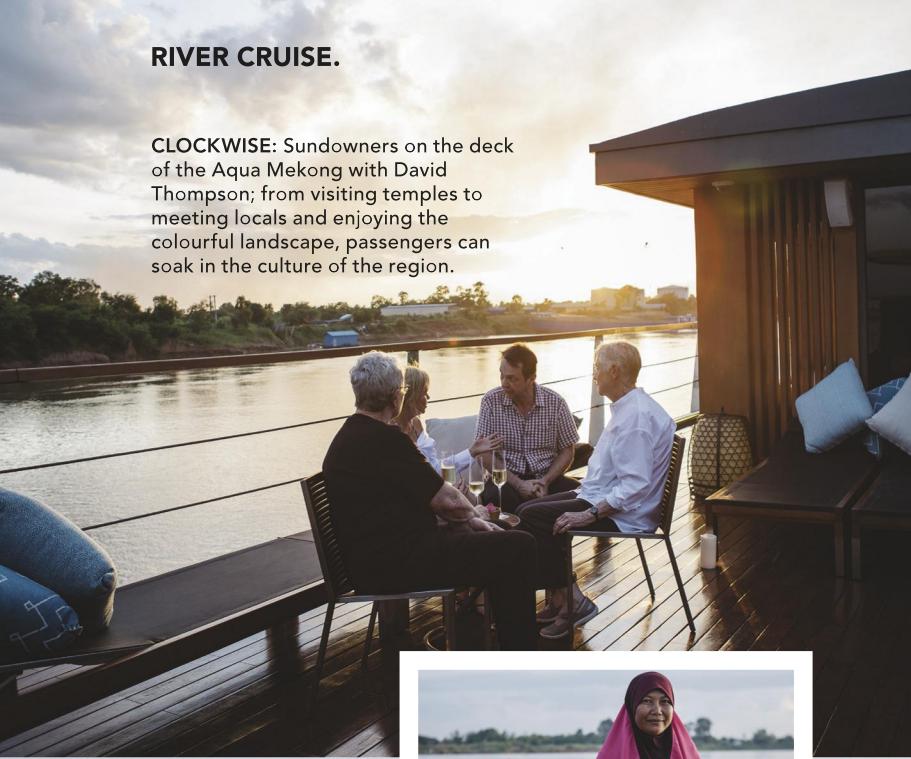
On-shore excursions allow you to explore the towns dotted along the Mekong, where you can visit bustling city centres local schools and abundant local markets. **OPPOSITE:**

From fish to fruit to fresh vegetables, there's produce aplenty at the market.



RIVER CRUISE.

CLOCKWISE: Sundowners on the deck of the Aqua Mekong with David Thompson; from visiting temples to meeting locals and enjoying the colourful landscape, passengers can soak in the culture of the region.



As we cross over into Cambodia, the food on the boat shifts to reflect our progress. Those unfamiliar with Cambodian food will find parallels with Thai cooking, though the brighter highs, pungent depths and chilli spikes are smoothed out. The result is a gentler, sweeter yet still aromatic cuisine. Notes of lemongrass and ginger are prevalent, and it seems to suit the landscape, which has grown quieter, more contemplative and agricultural, since departing Vietnam.

As our trip nears the finish line at Phnom Penh, our crew feel more like family, and they've decided that we've had enough time to acclimatise where food is concerned. As such, aperitivo hour snacks may or may not include crunchy deep-fried tarantulas and crickets to go with your Aperol spritz.

Five days on a boat comes to a close a lot faster than anticipated. For all the bias I may have had about cruise life, trips like this go a long way to shift perceptions. The calm and convenient prospect of unpacking once, yet being able to soak up an entire region, provides a compelling argument, for starters. From delving into the shifting culture of the landscape, to quiet modern luxury, oodles of space and truly spectacular food, there's every chance this travel writer will be boat-bound again before too long. For more information, visit aquaexpeditions.com