

# A Journey Back in Time along the Mekong River

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ABOVE, gold is used in abundance to decorate the extraordinarily beautiful temples of south-east Asia

BELOW, traders on the Mekong at Laos; the river is a major transport artery

From high up in the Tibetan Himalayas, the Mekong River plunges down through China, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia (Kampuchea) and Vietnam, passing through some of the least known areas of south-east Asia on its 3,000-mile (4,800km) journey to the South China Sea. As you travel from Chiang Saen to the Mekong Delta by speedboat, cargo boat and sometimes by bus, you will witness some of the most magnificent stretches of the river, as well as a mind-boggling collection of ethnic peoples, temples and cultures. Although this region is lurching rapidly into the modern world, this river still evokes images of a bygone age.



From its source in Tibet, the Mekong River flows for some 2,625 miles (4,200km) before emptying out into the South China Sea. Along the way, it passes through China, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Mekong is the twelfth largest river in the world and the largest river in south-east Asia. There are plenty of sights worth visiting. The town of Chiang Saen in northern Thailand is best known for

its temples (wats). Those to see include Wat Phra That Chom Kitt, which is reputed to hold part of the Buddha's cheekbone, the 13th-century stucco chedi (pagoda) of Wat Pa Sak and the imposing 14th-century Wat Chedi Luang.

At Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos, wander around the fine temples of Wat Xiengthong and Wat May, as well as Wat Siphuthabati. Other sights not to miss include the old royal palace and the 400-year-old cave temple of Tham Ting.

Chiang Khan and Nong Khai have some fine old river houses as well as scenic routes in the vicinity.

In Kong Chiam the different coloured waters of the Mekong mix with the River Mun. Other places of interest are the Pha Taem prehistoric paintings and the Kaeng Tana National Park. In Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia, visit the royal palace, the national museum of arts as well as the shocking museum at Tuol Sleng Museum, witness to the genocide of the Khmer Rouge.

In the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, sights to see include the floating market at Phung Hiep and the picturesque canals that criss-cross the entire region.

BELOW, for those living along the Mekong, much of daily working life is spent in a boat

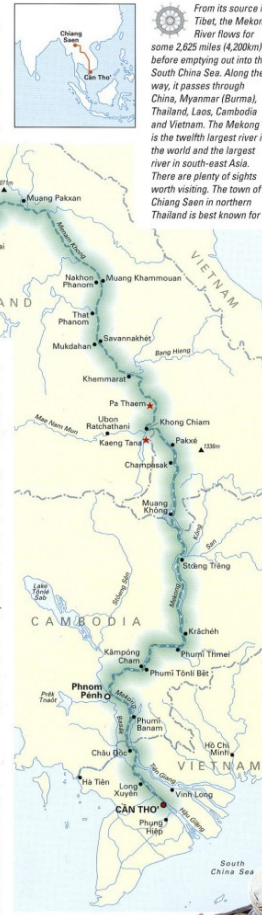
At the first light of dawn we edged out from the riverbank, the roar of the engine shattering the silence. Under an arching sky the distant bank receded into the horizon. Ahead lay the Menam Kong, known as the Mother of All Rivers, lazily cutting its way through a countryside of wooded hills and rice fields.

Of all the rivers in south-east Asia, the Mekong is the most legendary. It springs to life high up on the Tibetan plateau where the Himalayas are at their most beautiful. Still in its youth, it passes through the magnificent gorges of Yunnan Province in south-west China then flows alongside the border with Burma, threading its way through a countryside dotted with ethnic tribes. At the crossroads of Laos and Thailand its course widens, its gentle current mocking the ferocity of earlier rapids.

I had started out in Chiang Saen, in the north of Thailand, where the lapping of the river mixes with the thunderous roar of speed boats. In this town of ancient temples and pariah dogs I joined a group of Thai students and a tour guide for the first leg of my Mekong journey.

## THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

To the sounds reminiscent of a jumbo-jet at take-off and the vibrations of an ancient spin-drier, we sped off downriver propelled by a giant 10ft (3m) prop shaft connected to a Toyota car engine. Lurching past Wat Pa Nga and the famous Wat Phra That Chom Kitt, a temple believed to house a part of the Buddha's cheekbone, we promptly disappeared in the mist. Since the mid 1960s, this infamous area, nicknamed the Golden Triangle





ABOVE, formerly a royal building, Wat May, at Luang Prabang, took over 70 years to complete

has, according to some estimates, regularly supplied a staggering 2,000 tons of opium annually to the world's addicts, generating more funds than even rice or tourism. Neighbouring Burma is cited as the chief culprit in the narcotics trade but the accommodating Thai people have shown themselves by no means unwilling to make a little money from it.

My fellow passengers, however, do not resemble drug smugglers, nor even undercover agents. One student claims to have fled the pariah regime in Burma, another comes from a small village a half-day's journey downstream. Soon they are picnicking on chilled chicken's feet and potent Sangthep whisky (the staple local beverage) with all the enthusiasm of toddlers at a tea party.

It was late morning when we crossed the border of Laos at the town of Ban Houei Xai. Beneath a fat palm tree, a group of backpackers sat incongruously drinking cans of Coca-Cola through pink straws. All around them villagers pottered around on antiquated bicycles, seemingly blissfully ignorant of the tourist invasion that had suddenly befallen them.

If the first thing that you notice about Laos is the undeveloped nature of the country, the second is the currency. The *kip*, as it is known, is worth

about as little as the paper it is printed on. To simplify matters, however, the understanding Laotian people allow foreigners to pay in dollars or even in Thai *baht*. Often, at the end of your journey, you will end up paying in all three currencies. Alternatively, you may end up receiving your change in the form of boiled sweets.

There are other delightful inconsistencies in this isolated backwater. When a boatman says he will leave in a little time from now, he means tomorrow or the next day, or if there is a temple fair, maybe the day after. But as soon as you think you have mastered this wonderfully flexible attitude to time, you arrive at the anticipated moment to find that the boatman and the only form of transport have long since departed.

Thankfully there is more than one boat leaving for Luang Prabang and so I set off once again downriver. Soon Thailand is little more than a dot in the distance. As we motor downstream, the countryside becomes more mountainous. Gigantic limestone cliffs, clothed in lush vegetation that spills down to the water's edge, tower above the river.

In Pak Beng, a small village built into the mountainside, we halt for a plate of spicy pork intestines and a glass of Laotian tea. Then we

continue on through the wind and gathering rain. Finally, after what seems an eternity, the river broadens out and we draw alongside the landing ramp at Luang Prabang, the former capital of Lang Xiang, kingdom of a million elephants.

## CITY OF MAGIC AND PLEASURE

There can be few more magical cities than Luang Prabang, sitting at the confluence of the Mekong and the Nam Khan rivers with its glittering temples. The Lhao have long viewed the place as the cradle of their civilisation and over the centuries have built dozens of resplendent temples and palaces there. Some, like Wat Chom Si, are gloriously set atop nearby hills surrounded by swaying palm trees; others nestle amidst country lanes where the local people float past on bicycles.

While the people of Chiang Saen lay claim to the Buddha's cheekbone, the people of Luang Prabang boast his footprint. At the temple of Wat Siphuthabatt, perched nearby on a rocky outcrop in the centre of town, devotees flock to the 10ft (3m) imprint which, legend has it, the Buddha left as a sign of his immortality.

Elsewhere in this magnificent city, where the monks file at dawn along the narrow streets in robes of unimaginable glory, dreams take on an uncanny reality. Here, surrounded by perfumed forests, the days of the week, even the months, seem to merge. The lethargy is as immediate as



it is all-embracing. Progress seems a world away, hidden by the mists of time.

As striking as the temples of Luang Prabang are the people. Tall and gracious, their fine Mongolian features and rounded faces set them aside from the neighbouring Thais. Despite being gentle, tolerant Buddhists, they are by no means averse to life's pleasures. Until recently, opium dens were as prolific as houses of worship and Lhao women fondly remembered as the prize of

ABOVE, temporarily aground at Chiang Khan, in Thailand

BELOW, Nakhon Phanom, home to thousands of Vietnamese refugees in the 1950s and 60s





ABOVE, the Laotian-style chedi at Thar Phanom; the temple has been restored many times

south-east Asia. "The extreme liberty of morals that reign here make foreigners easily find hospitality," wrote Marthe Bassenne in 1912. "Since libations and ritual gifts appease them, the young girls are seldom shy."

Whether for lack of ritual gifts or as a result of changing times, my experiences are of a less forthcoming nature. And so after exploring the temples, the sleepy markets and shop houses where they sell potent rice wine, I head back down to the river, back to where the Mekong takes on a new guise as it continues downstream towards Chiang Khan, Sangkhom and Nakhon Phanom.

#### EARLY EXPLORERS

In the cool of the morning we set off once again, sailing past ragged villages where plumes of smoke rise into the air from primitive stoves and where the cries of children can be heard above the steady roar of the engine. With each curve, the golden spires of Luang Prabang fade into the distance, until soon they are only memories.

Indeed it is one of the great ironies of the Mekong that a river of such magnitude should for so long have remained shrouded in mystery. In 1866, a naval expedition under Captain Doudart de Lagree set out from Saigon to explore the Mekong which, it was believed, would lead them into the heart of Yunnan. Despite their valiant

efforts, Captain Doudart and his crew were forced to abandon their boats. Undaunted by this they reached Chieng Mung in dug-outs within six months. From there they continued to Yunnan Fu and Tali Fu, although Captain Lagree himself died before completing the journey.

Later expeditions founded on the Keng Luang rapids and further downstream near Khemmarat. Indeed, it was only in April 1995 that a Franco-British expedition announced that they had discovered the source of the Mekong, 16,447ft (5,000m) high at the head of the Rup-Sa Pass in Tibet.

My voyage suffers from fewer mishaps. After crossing over from Pak Lay in Laos to Chiang Khan back in Thailand, I continue east along the banks of this great river through a countryside of staggering beauty. Travelling sometimes by boat, sometimes by bus, I stayed in various 'gue-how' (the Thais can't pronounce guest houses) overlooking the Mekong. From simple riverine huts I witnessed sunrises and sunsets with compositions and colours so awesome that no artist could have dreamt them up.

The enchanting people who live along this stretch of the river are known as Isaan people and are supremely superstitious. Typically they name their children 'mouse', 'pig' or 'crab' to ward off the evil spirits. They also believe that, unless someone drowns in the Mekong every year, the

## ALONG THE MEKONG RIVER

rains will not come. In November, they float boats made from banana leaves on the river to cleanse their souls for the coming year. On other occasions they place carved wooden phalluses along the river bank to fertilise the water and ensure a plentiful catch.

Below the towns of Thar Phanom and Khemmarat the river changes course, weaving its way past small islands covered in low bamboo scrub and sparse vegetation. Shortly before it exits Thailand, the sluggish brown waters of the Mekong are joined by the clear waters of the River Mun, Thailand's largest tributary. For a brief moment, the water is clouded as the two powerful currents come together. Then the majestic Mekong continues its course, finally swinging out of Thailand near the town of Kong Chiam and

continuing its long journey over the Khone rapids and into Cambodia.

#### KILLING FIELDS

The sun was bleached out with a heavy haze. It hung over the river, a torpid weight suspended on a cloud of thin air. Mosquitoes mustered around the sprawling port where a few overcrowded passenger boats unloaded baskets of fish and fruits. Here in Phnom Penh, where the waters of the great Tonle Sap River feed into the Mekong, the river brings a sense of melancholy. For this was the scene of one of the world's modern holocausts. Between 1975 and 1979, more than one million Cambodian people died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Hundreds of thousands of others were

BELOW, passenger boats at Phnom Penh, Cambodia

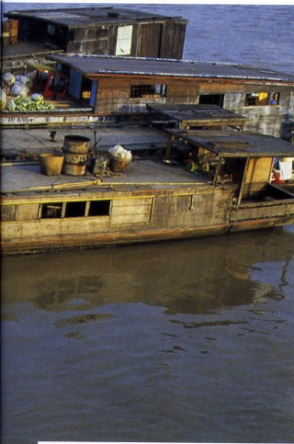




ABOVE, *Can Tho, on the great Mekong Delta*

sent to re-education camps. Even now the tragedy continues as mines unleash their fury on innocent victims in the rice fields. In Cambodia more than anywhere the stately course of the river mocks the killing that has taken place along its fertile banks. Now a vast and gentle life force, the majestic river flows for about 313 miles (500km), passing through Kratie, Stung Treng, Kompong Cham and Phnom Penh on its long course towards the Mekong Delta. When I came here three years ago, I could hear the sounds

of shelling at night. Today the guns are silent, but the ghosts live on, a haunting silence that accompanies the gentle ebb and flow of the Mekong on the last leg of its journey south. Crossing into Vietnam, I continue my voyage south through a bountiful land of rice fields and lush plantations that crowd down to the water's edge. Dozens of boats busily criss-cross the great network of canals, carrying fruits and vegetables to the villages that have sprung up all along the low banks of the delta.



The Vietnamese call this stretch of the river *Cau long*, meaning nine dragons. Each 'dragon' represents one of the major branches of the Mekong as it fans out towards the sea. During the Vietnam war this was the scene of some of the fiercest bombing. Now the soil is once again rich with the silt of the Mekong, the area supporting nearly one-quarter of the country's population. My voyage down this last stretch of the great Mekong is like a journey into the past. Catching a passenger boat in Chau Doc, I follow the Bassac River, which is known as the lower Mekong, past villages that appear to have stepped back in time. On the river banks, old men in trilbies chase ducks down to the water's edge, whilst at low tide children search for cockles and crabs in the silt to sell in the local market place. A few ancient trucks piled high with crates of Coca-Cola are the only signs that Vietnam too is hurtling forward to join the modern world. South of Can Tho, the landscape becomes even lusier, the land surrounded on all sides by water and marshland. And so I end up passing Tra On and beyond to where this majestic river empties out into the South China Sea, a palpable lifeline that has silently endured wars and massacres and which now brings hope to the people who live along its banks.



LEFT, *tranquility and solitude on the middle Mekong*

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

- Long-tailed speed boats from Chiang Saen to Chiang Kung take approximately two hours. From Chiang Kung, it takes five hours to Luang Prabang and a further five hours to Chiang Khan and Vientiane. Slow boats take three to four days to cover the same route.
- From Kratie in Cambodia, passenger boats run to Phnom Penh, taking one day, from where you can continue over the Vietnamese border by bus.
- Slow boats leave from Chau Doc to Hathiien and Vinhlong. To cover other stretches of the river you must go by road, travel by cargo boat or arrange your own transport.
- The best time to travel is between October and January when the rainy season is finished – and the river level is high. In the dry months, much of the river is un-navigable.
- Visitors to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam should contact the relevant embassies about visa requirements. You will need anti-malaria tablets and other inoculations. Ask your doctor for details.
- For information about trips, contact Symbiosis Expedition Planning, 113 Bolingbroke Grove, London SW11 1DA (Tel: 0171 224 5906; Fax: 0171 924 5907).