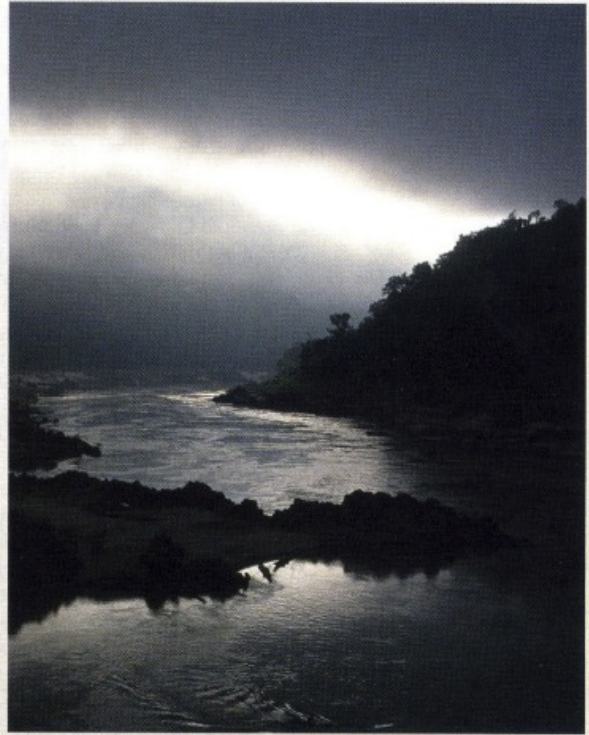


DISCOVERIES



From the mountains of Tibet, **the Mekong River plunges through the plains of China before emptying into the sea.** Along the way, it provides a view of some of the most scenic and varied landscapes in Asia.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN DAVIES/ON



Storm clouds looming over the Mekong during the monsoon season in Laos.

ON A **SLOW BOAT** TO CHINA

The Mekong is a river of moods that are constantly changing.

Sunrise over the Mekong River is one of the great spectacles of Southeast Asia. As the first rays of light stream over the hills, the waters of the Menam Kong – literally mother of all waters – take on life. Flotillas of boats scurry up and down this slumbering waterway that separates Thailand from the People's Democratic Republic of Laos. A fisherman casts his net into the river now colored with reflections from the sun.

We had left the town of Huay Xai that morning, gliding slowly between the luxuriant banks of the river, the gentle murmur of the engine breaking in on the silent world. *Bay cha cha noi*, the boatman had said pointing apologetically to the overladen slow boat and shrugging his shoulders. Rather than a two-day trip to Luang Prabang, he suggested I take the speedboat that would take a matter of hours. I shook my head. The Mekong is a river of moods that are constantly changing. Traveling by slow boat with an army of vendors carrying vegetables was by far the better option.

My first glimpse of this mighty river had been in Yunnan Province in China where the Mekong is known as the *Lancang Jian* or Turbulent River. Viewed from high up in the mountains, it snakes its way through terraced rice fields and scattered

villages, dark and ominous – free of all signs of navigation. By the time it reaches the northeastern region of Thailand, however, the river is broad and for the most part gentle, curving lazily through rice fields, tobacco and vegetable plantations. It's a lifeline for the people who live along its banks.

IN THESE REMOTE REGIONS, legends flourish. Locals tell that the river is a *naga* or mythical serpent and that every year before the rains arrive somebody must drown in the Mekong. People believe that if the river does not claim a victim, the rains will not come and the crops will wither and die.

Undoubtedly, the most magical city on the Mekong is Luang Prabang. Viewed from the banks of the river, it resembles a small fishing village situated among swaying palm trees and undulating hills. It is only on closer view that the city's glittering array of temples and old colonial villas becomes apparent. Here, surrounded by perfumed forests, progress seems a world away.

Early voyagers who journeyed down the Mekong were also inspired by the waterway. "The Mae Nam Kong is magnificent," wrote James McCarthy in 1884. Others describe sudden whirlpools, cataracts and giant rapids that made large parts of the river unnavigable. In 1886, a naval expedition under Captain Doudart de la Gree set out to find the source of the Mekong. However, Doudart and his crew were forced to abandon their boats. Indeed, it was only in April 1995 – more than a century later – that a Franco-British expedition discovered the source of the Mekong, 5,000 meters high at the head of the Rupsa-La Pass in Tibet.

South of Luang Prabang, the Mekong cuts through low lying hills, acting in many places as the border between Thailand and Laos. With each curve of the river, the gold spires of Luang Prabang fade into the distance.

Even today it is impossible to travel the whole way down the Mekong by boat. During the dry months especially, large parts are impassable.



At left: A vendor carrying wicker baskets prepares to board a passenger boat in Luang Prabang, the former capital of Laos. **Above:** A cargo boat on the Mekong above Nong Khai Province in Northeast Thailand. On the far bank of the river is Laos.



A fisherman casts his net into the raging Khong Phapheng falls in Champassak Province in southern Laos.

The construction of giant dams upriver is an added threat to the river's fragile ecosystem.

Below the towns of That 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, swinging out of Thailand near the town of Kong Chiam and continuing its long journey over the Khone rapids and into Cambodia.

IN PHNOM PENH, WHERE THE WATERS of the great Tonle Sap River feed into the Mekong, the river brings a special sense of melancholy. For this country 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 sent to reeducation camps.

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 Mekong flows for about 500 kilometers passing through Kratie, Stung Treng, Kompong Cham and Phnom Penh on its way to the Delta.

Crossing into Vietnam, on the last leg of my journey south, I continue through a bountiful land of rice fields and fruit plantations that crowd down to the water's edge. The Vietnamese call this stretch of the river *Cuu Long*, meaning nine dragons. Each dragon represents one of the major branches of the Mekong as it fans out toward the sea.

My voyage down this last stretch of the river is like a journey down memory lane. Catching a crowded passenger boat in Chau Doc, I follow the Bassac River past villages that have stepped back in time. On the riverbanks, old men in trilbies herd ducks to the water's edge. At low tide, children search for cockles and crabs in the silt to sell in the local market. A few 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 flooded rice paddies give way to marshland. Beyond, I catch a last glimpse of the river as it empties out into the South China Sea, a vast expanse of water that has silently endured wars and massacres and now brings hope to the people who live along its banks. □

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THE MEKONG RIVER

NUMBERS The Mekong is the 13th longest river in the world. Its estimated length is 4,023 kilometers. Approximately half the river's length is in China.

FOOD SUPPLIES About 90 million people rely on the river for rice production. About 14 million hectares of rice grow in the Greater Mekong Subregion.

INHABITANTS The river has more species of giant fish than any other, most notably the Giant Mekong Catfish.

STRANGE FACTS Balls of light can be seen rising from the river's surface and are known as Naga fireballs. Locals attribute them to Mekong dragons. A Mekong is also a type of alcoholic drink.

