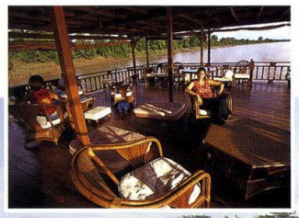
# Slowboat on the Mekong

by Ben Davies

*In the southern reaches of Laos, beyond the towns of Savannakhet and Pakxe, the most beautiful stretch of the Mekong River flows past the pre-Angkor ruins of Champassak to Khong Island and the dramatic Khone rapids. I spent three days cruising this splendid stretch of water aboard the luxurious* Vat Phou.

Southeast Asia's greatest river is born high up in the Tibetan Himalayas in one of the most remote corners on Earth. From this inauspicious beginning, the Mekong, known as the Mother of All Rivers, flows through the rugged mountains of south-western China, passing through Burma and Thailand before entering Laos near the town of Houei Xai. For some 1,900km (1,200 miles), it then cuts through this lush and beautiful country, finally crossing over into Cambodia and Vietnam for the last leg of its journey to the South China Sea.

Decades of war and political turmoil have until recently kept adventurers away from the Mekong, destroying the dreams of early explorers to travel the full length of the river. These days, with the opening up of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, it is once again possible to travel by boat along certain stretches of the Mekong.





The most popular section is from Chiang Khong on the Thai–Lao border to the beautiful ancient city of **Luang Prabang** (see pages 100–101), a journey of about five hours by speed boat (or two days on a slowboat). But for travellers in search of something a little more luxurious, the southern stretch of the Mekong from Pakxe (Pakse) to the rapids of Don Khong Island, is an even more rewarding alternative.

Navigable all year round, this 140-km (87-mile) stretch of water offers dramatically varied countryside as well as the chance of a visit to the ancient Hindu and Khmer temple of Wat Phu (or Phou). Most of all, it offers the opportunity of a magnificent cruise on one of the world's finest rivers.

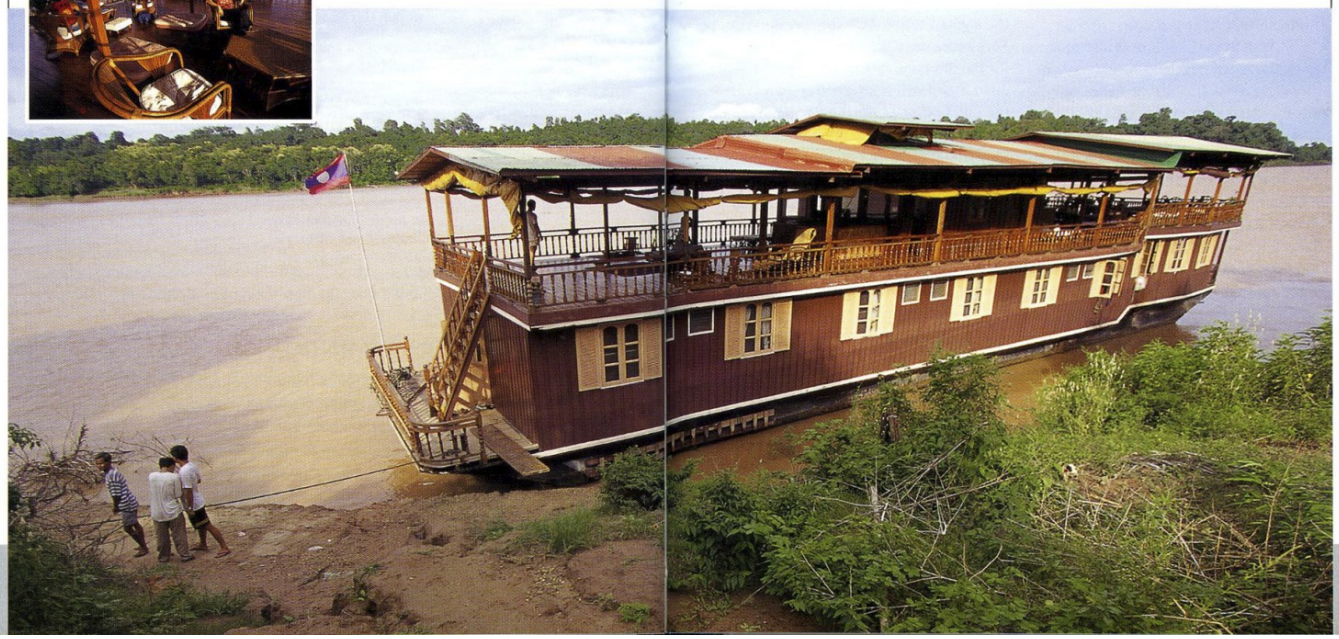
The best time to take a voyage on the Mekong is during the winter months, from October to the end of February, when the weather is temperate and the river is at its most beautiful. This is a time when the waters are still high from the monsoonal rains. It is also a time when some of Laos' most famous religious festivals are held, including Bun Pha Wet, which celebrates King

1 As with any tropical country, you will need a basic level of fitness for walking in the heat. From March to May temperatures can often exceed 35°C (95°F).

★★ ★ If you want to travel in comfort along this stretch of the Mekong, the best option is to take a 3-day cruise aboard the *Vat Phou*. The 34-m (110-foot) vessel has 12 rosewood cabins (with twin beds), a dining room, and a magnificent viewing deck. You should make advanced reservations through Mekong Land (see Contacts).

Take a comfortable pair of walking boots for exploring the Khmer temples and rapids. In the monsoon season, make sure you have waterproofs and mosquito repellent.

*BELOW The* Vat Thou, *with its elegant sun deck (INSET), offers an opulent view of the southern reaches of the Mekong. It's a journey best made between October and February, when this stretch of the river looks its most spectacular*



Vessanthara's reincarnation as a Buddha, and Magha Puja, which marks the end of the Buddha's time in the monastery.

## "Mother of All Rivers"

It is mid-morning when the luxurious *Vat Phou* leaves its moorings in the old French town of Pakxe, manoeuvring out into the middle of the Nam Se River before steaming into the Mekong proper. From on deck, our motley group of passengers—an eccentric Italian journalist and his wife, two French dentists and their families, a Spanish teacher, and I—can just make out the mountains of Champassak province to the south and, further off, the hazy outline of Thailand tapering off into the distance.

Sipping our *Vat Phou* fruit cocktails, we sail downstream, passing clusters of wooden houses and glittering Buddhist temples that seem to sprout out of the lush undergrowth. With each curve of the river, the scenery becomes wilder and more rugged, the limestone cliffs towering on either side of the Mekong until soon Pakxe is little more than a dot in the distance.

To be honest, I had never intended to explore southern Laos by luxury boat and certainly not to join an organized adventure tour group. Like many travellers, I have always associated river adventure with dug-out canoes, manifestly unsafe vintage cruisers, and mosquito-infested river banks. And yet I found I rather liked the experience. Travelling on an organized cruise saves time and hassles. And because there's a guide (speaking English and French), you learn more than you would otherwise about the people and the environment in which they live. More than anything, a luxury cruise enables you to enjoy the Mekong in comfort, without worrying about where you are going next and what you will do.

Life on board the *Vat Phou* soon settles into a steady rhythm. After breakfasting on French bread, scrambled eggs, and mouthwatering tropical fruits (including exotic rambutans and bright orange-coloured papaya), we move to the sun deck, lazing on beautiful bamboo settees and rattan mats, watching the magnificent river scenery as it passes slowly by. Lunch is served at 12:30 by crew members dressed in finely woven Lao sarongs. That still leaves plenty of time for trips ashore, for afternoon naps, or the opportunity to admire some of the most spectacular landscape in the whole of Laos.

## Temples and Monsoons

The rain is already falling as we draw alongside land, a short distance from the ancient town of **Champassak**. Formerly one of the centres of power for the 6th-century Chenla empire, this quiet little town is now better known as the jump-off point for the Khmer temple of **Wat Phu**, a 15-minute bus ride to the southwest.

Although Wat Phu cannot compare with its better-known peer Angkor Wat in Cambodia, its imposing setting at the foot of the Phou Pasak Mountain lends a special power to the crumbled walls and piles of weathered masonry. It was

### Source of the Mekong

The first recorded attempt to find the source of the Mekong took place in June 1866, when two gunboats under the command of Doudart de Lagree set sail from Saigon with the aim of navigating the full length of the river. The voyage, however, was to end in tragedy when they were forced to abandon ship. Later expeditions also foundered 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, 5,000m (16,500 feet) up at the head of the Rup-Sa Pass in Tibet.





### A Taste of Laos

If you have never eaten Lao food before, try these local specialities:

- *Laap*, made of finely chopped and seasoned meat with onions, lemon, and chillies.
- *Khao niao*, a type of sticky rice that accompanies almost every meal and is typically served out of small rattan baskets.
- *Neung paa*, a steamed fish.
- *Tam maak hung*, a spicy salad sometimes known as sotam and made from shredded green papaya and chilli.
- *Khao phun* or flour noodles
- *Tom khaa kai*, a spicy soup made with chicken and coconut milk.
- For the local brew, try *Beer Lao* or *lao lao*, a potent form of rice whiskey.

discovered by the French explorer Francis Garnier in 1866, but its previous history remains shrouded in mystery. Archaeologists believe that the original Hindu complex was built as early as the 6th century, at least 200 years before work commenced on Angkor. In the 11th century the temple was turned into a Buddhist shrine by the Khmers, with construction beginning during the reign of King Jayavarman VI (1080–1107).

Approaching the grand processional causeway from the east, we follow our guide past a pair of ruined sandstone pavilions containing carvings of Shiva, the Hindu deity with powers of reproduction. But it is higher up, beyond a pavilion dedicated to Nandi the Bull (another common Hindu feature), that we come to the main temple sanctuary, situated near a shallow cave through which flows a sacred stream. Here we see the most delightful carvings, ranging from dancing heavenly nymphs (*apsaras*) to Indra riding on a three-headed elephant.

Visitors fired up by visions of Indiana Jones's "Lost Ark" will enjoy Wat Phu's own little secret. Legend has it that a priceless Emerald Buddha is hidden somewhere inside the complex, although so far nothing has been discovered.

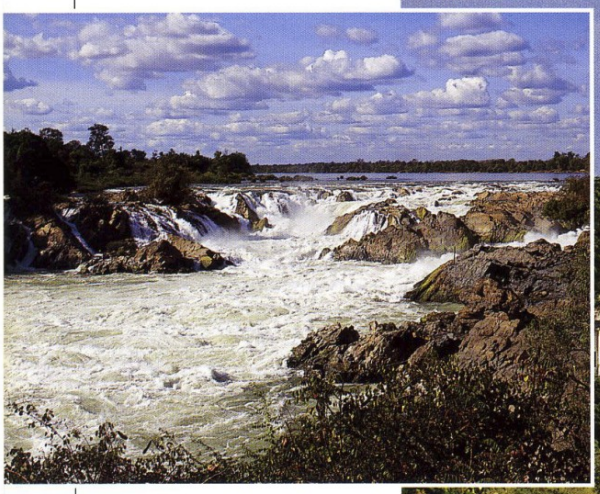
By the time we descend from the uppermost level, the temple is wholly obscured by the monsoonal downpour. Back on board, we pass through the rugged foothills of the Annamite Mountain Range, on either side of the river. In the late afternoon, the *Vat Phou* moors alongside the village of **Ban Boun** and we are taken for a guided tour of this simple community set amidst lush ricefields on the banks of the Mekong.

## Four Thousand Islands

At first light, the engines of the *Vat Phou* splutter into life. Continuing our leisurely voyage downriver, we enter a stretch of water so vast that it almost resembles an ocean. Only the distant villages and the lines of waving children on the far bank tell us that we are inching forwards towards the Cambodian border and the Khone falls.

Soon, the Mekong takes on a different guise, dividing into a maze of channels that cut through this magnificent countryside like the tentacles of an octopus. The Lao call this part of the river See Pan Done (Four Thousand Islands) after the countless islands that emerge from this giant waterway. It is said that during the rainy season the Mekong reaches a breadth of 14km (9 miles), creating treacherous whirlpools and sudden eddies that make further progress increasingly hazardous.

After mooring alongside the northern tip of **Don Khong**, which is the largest of the islands in the Mekong, we are driven to **Wat Chom Thong**, a Khmer-influenced temple built some time in the early 19th century and now inhabited by Buddhist monks clothed in beautiful saffron robes. This crumbling



wat, surrounded by coconut palms and sturdy-looking mango trees, is renowned for its finely carved wooden window shutters.

Temples are not the only thing for which this picturesque island of 55,000 inhabitants is renowned. In December the fun-loving people hold a five-day boat-racing festival on the Mekong (Bun Suang Heua), nurturing their energies with ferocious amounts of rice wine. To experience this singular event, or simply to tour the sacred caves and temples on the island, it's best to hire a bicycle from the Auberge Sala Done Khong, an old teak hotel in Muang Khong.

From Wat Chom Thong, we cross over to the mainland on a rustic catamaran made from antique oil drums lashed together with wooden planks. It's a scenic 30-km (19-mile) drive further, through glistening ricefields to the widest rapids in the whole of Southeast

*ABOVE One of the many falls that make up the raging Khong Phapheng rapids. It is near here that you may see the freshwater Mekong dolphins*
*RIGHT A more peaceful riverbank scene, at Pakxe*

## WATERFALLS AND PLATEAUX

If floating down the Mekong gives you an appetite for exploring the surrounding region, try combining the river cruise with a visit to the beautiful Bolovens Plateau and the waterfall at Tadlo, a two-hour drive to the northeast of Pakxe (see pages 130–7). The really adventurous can travel by bus (or take a tour) to one of the country's last frontiers beyond Attapeu, near the mountainous border with Vietnam.

Asia. In the distance the Khong Hai Mountains delineate the border between Cambodia and Laos.

## Voice of the Mekong

We hear the mighty **Khong Phapheng Falls** long before we reach the river bank, their tumultuous roar growing ever louder at our approach. Measuring 10km (6 miles) in width and made up of literally hundreds of raging cascades and precipitous channels, they have not surprisingly been named "the voice of the Mekong" by the local people.

In the shadow of these gargantuan falls we take an incongruous lunch of fresh fish, sun-dried beef, and salad, served on china dishes carried from the boat by crew members. Afterwards, we wander down the path that leads to the edge of the water.

It was Garnier (see page 113) who first reported the existence of the rapids in 1866, when they forced him, en route to China, to abandon his vessel and continue his travels over land. Later explorers also had their dreams of navigating the full length of the Mekong shattered by these raging torrents.

In the late 19th century, the French built a 5-km (3-mile) stretch of narrow-gauge railway to transport cargo around the Khong Phapheng and Li Phi falls (the old locomotive can still be seen near the railway bridge at Ban Khone). Such was the zeal of the French, that they even dismantled their boats piece by piece and then reassembled them on the far side of the rapids.

Locals will tell you that beyond the falls you may occasionally catch sight of freshwater dolphins. The dolphins, with their bluish-grey colouring, are best seen during the winter months, between December and May, when they gather in the late afternoons. But these days, their very existence has been threatened by dynamite fishing, a popular pastime over the border in Cambodia.

## Voyage Upriver

In the early afternoon, we set off once again, this time upriver, passing villages half-concealed behind thick clumps of bamboo and papaya trees. Occasionally small fishing boats dart out from the shoreline. Besides that, there is little sign of life. One of the most striking things about the Lao people is their totally lackadaisical outlook on life. While the Chinese are renowned for their business acumen and the Vietnamese for their hard work, the Lao have long been held up as an example of delightful indolence.

This can be blamed partly on the people's insatiable appetite for *lao lao*, a potent form of local rice whiskey that is found almost everywhere, despite the fact that it is officially discouraged. So keen are the Lao on this fearsome drink, that they even place it in small glasses as offerings for their house spirits.

But there's another reason for the people's *joie de vivre*, for here on the Mekong, hard work is rendered almost wholly unnecessary by the abundant gifts of nature.

We halt in the late afternoon at the village of **Baan Paou**, where the simple self-sufficiency of the people is almost palpable. Like so many other villagers on the Mekong, the inhabitants of Baan Paou are wholly reliant on the river for their food, their water, their irrigation, and even their transport. In the evening, entire families can be seen washing in the river or casting fishing nets on its clouded surface. Further downriver, clothes are soaped and neatly laid out on the banks to dry.

That night, a major storm breaks out directly overhead. Torrential rain streams down the windows of our luxury vessel. Outside, on the river bank, a few naked children play in the rain, their laughter trailing away into the distance, barely heard above the crashes of thunder.

## Jungle Temple

The following morning the sky is overcast, the sun hidden behind thick monsoon clouds. But the air is cool and pleasant, and a fresh breeze blows along the river. Shortly before 10am, the *Vat Phou* moors alongside **Ban Noi**, another fine little village perched on the fertile banks of the river. From here, we follow our guide along a narrow trail that leads for 1km (½ mile) through tall trees to the ancient ruins of **Oum Muang** (alternatively known as Oup Muang or Muang Tomo) deep within the jungle.

Built some time between the 6th and 9th centuries, around the same period as Wat Phu Champassak on the opposite bank of the river, Oum Muang luxuriates in its sheer isolation. Here there are no crowds or guides, just a feeling of total abandonment. The remains of two stone sanctuaries are all that now stand. Elsewhere, spread over an area the size of a football field, lie beautiful moss-covered slabs of laterite, faded sandstone carvings, and the remains of a seven-headed naga snake that still guards the temple complex. Probably the temple was abandoned by the warlike Khmers at the end of the 13th century and has since been left to the forces of nature.

From Oum Muang, we walk back through this picturesque village of wooden houses before continuing our journey upriver.

Later on in the afternoon, we go ashore to climb to **Wat Phou Ngoy**, a hillside Buddhist retreat that offers superb panoramic views of the Mekong. Then we are off once again, sipping cocktails and savouring our last night on the Mekong. The next morning, at precisely 7am, the *Vat Phou* steams into **Pakxe**, marking the end of our short stay in paradise.

## Passenger Boat Travel on the Mekong

For adventure travellers who do not have the budget to cruise down the river on the *Vat Phou*, all is not lost. You can enjoy a magnificent, if less opulent boat trip aboard one of the motorized passenger vessels that leave from Pakxe.

The boats take two hours to Champassak (it's best to stay overnight there) and a further eight hours to Don Khong. The price is the same whether you travel inside the overcrowded boat or on the flimsy roof (most people prefer the latter as you can enjoy the magnificent views). To avoid getting serious sun stroke, make sure you bring a hat or an umbrella for shade. Baguette bread, bottles of water, and other snacks are worth their weight in gold on this long, crowded, but immensely rewarding journey.

## DOLPHINS OF THE MEKONG

They are called *Orcaella brevirostris* or *paa khaa*, have bulging bluish-grey foreheads, and reputedly live in small numbers in the rivers in Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. The best time to see the dolphins of the Mekong is in the late afternoon, when you may occasionally glimpse them leaping through the murky waters. And dolphins are not the only Mekong speciality: in the northern stretches of the river, you may also come across the rare *pla buk*, known as the monster of the Mekong (see page 108).

## GOING IT ALONE

### Internal Travel

You can get to Pakxe either by air (there are twice-daily flights from Vientiane) or by road via the Thai border crossing at Chongmek. If you are travelling from Bangkok, the easiest and most pleasant way to get to Pakxe is to fly to Ubon Ratchathani in northeast Thailand, from where you can hire a taxi at the airport (600 baht/$16) to take you as far as Chongmek. Once you have crossed the border into Laos, a selection of ancient buses and cars ferry passengers to Meun Khao, from where it's a 10-minute hop over the river to Pakxe.

Most tour operators will be able to arrange transport to Ubon as well as onward connections.

### When to Go

The best time to go cruising on the Mekong is in the cool season, between October and the end of February, when the skies are blue and temperatures range from 15°C to 30°C (59–86°F). From March to May, temperatures often exceed 35°C (95°F) and the low level of the water can make river transport difficult.

From June to the end of September is the rainy season, when tropical downpours alternate with fine days.

### Planning

Prior to your arrival in Laos, you will need a tourist visa. These can be obtained through your tour operator or travel agents in Bangkok (allow 2 days).

### Arranging a Boat

The *Vat Phou* operates 3-day/3-night scheduled cruises from Pakxe for around $450 per person stopping at Wat Phou Temple, Oum Muang Sanctuary, Khong Island, and the Phapheng Falls. Prices include spacious twin-bed cabins, food, and tours. Reservations should be made in advance through Mekong Land in Bangkok (see Contacts). They can also arrange transfers to Vientiane, Ubon Ratchathani, or the beautiful former Laos capital, Luang Prabang.

Those who want to go it alone can use one of the regular public boats that leave from the jetty in Pakxe for Champassak, taking 2 hours (foreigners almost inevitably pay more than the locals). There are also crowded ferries that go the whole way to Don Khong, taking around 10 hours. Travel agencies in Pakxe may be able to arrange boat charters to Don Khong for up to 20 people.

### Accommodation

Accommodation in Pakxe ranges from the upmarket but ugly Champassak Palace Hotel to a range of cheap hotels and guest houses around the market place. Elsewhere in Champassak province and on Khong Island, there's a handful of standard hotels as well as several cheaper guest houses.

### Health Matters

- Southern Laos is a malarial zone. Consult your doctor prior to departure and take precautions.
- Bring insect repellent and mosquito coils; at night wear long-sleeved shirts and trousers.
- Carry a small first-aid kit that includes antiseptic, plasters, and dysentery tablets.
- Drink boiled or bottled water only.
- Wash or peel all fruit and avoid ice.
- Make sure you have comprehensive medical insurance.

*LEFT Following our guide through the jungle to the ruined temple of Oum Muang*
*ABOVE The ruins of Wat Phu, a fantastic lost city near Champassak*