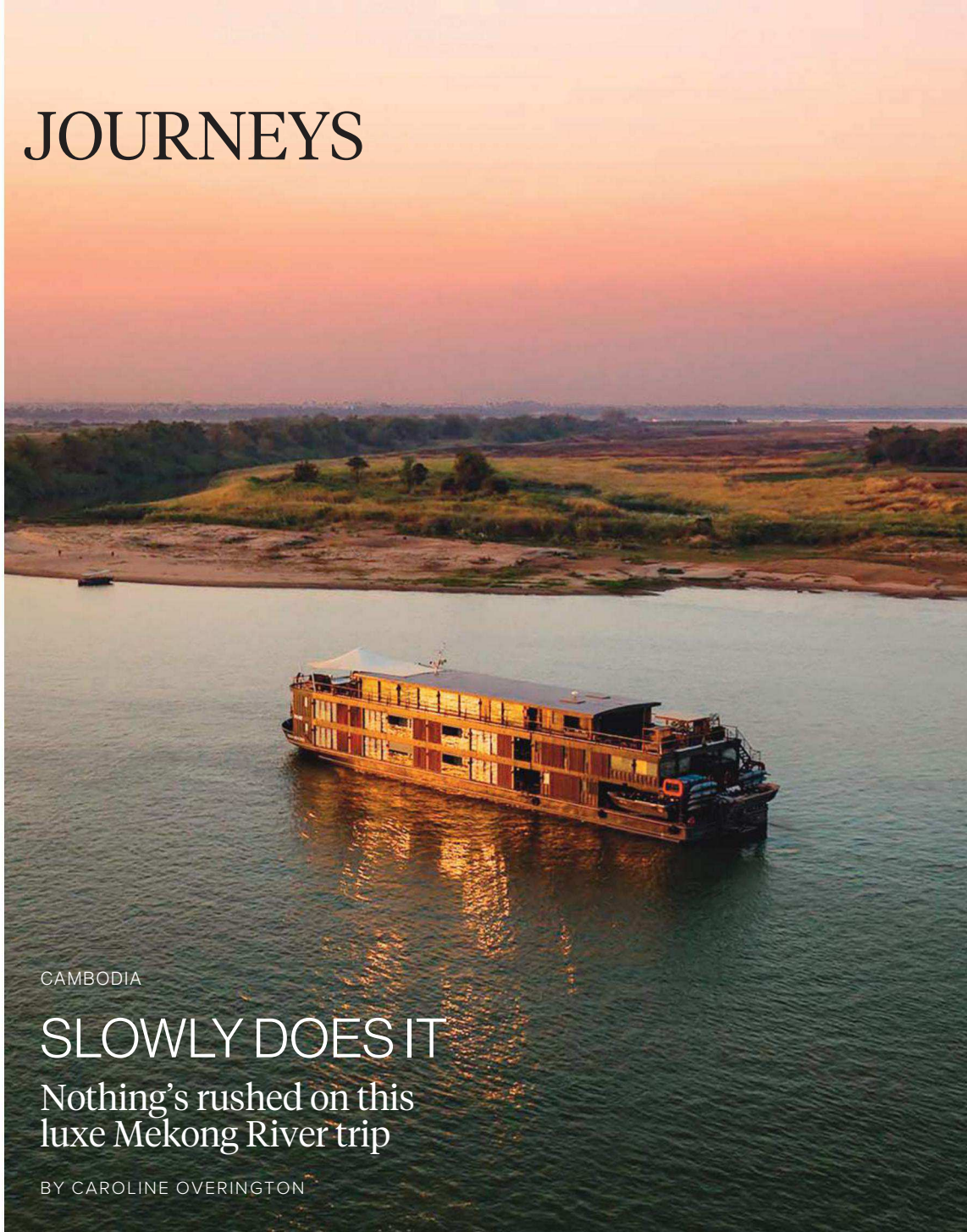


# JOURNEYS



CAMBODIA

## SLOWLY DOES IT

Nothing's rushed on this luxe Mekong River trip

BY CAROLINE OVERINGTON

Four nights on a luxurious small ship going down the Mekong River? I know this is very wrong of me, but I am a tiny bit worried about it.

I am a restless person. I know you're meant to relax and enjoy the sumptuous surroundings as you slowly glide along but, like many people, I also crave adventure on holidays. Will there be enough to do?

I need not be worried. The creative folk at Aqua Expeditions keep everyone busy with at least two, sometimes three daily excursions – mountain biking, kayaking, and cultural tours of Buddhist temples – but guess what else I discover?

You can just soak in the ship's plunge pool overlooking the river. You can just eat, drink and enjoy yourself at a slower pace. Aqua Expeditions is a world leader in these kinds of remote expeditions – they have super yachts and small ships touring the Galapagos Islands, the Amazon, Indochina and the Arctic Circle – and they know how to get the mix right.

We start our adventure by flying Cathay Pacific from Sydney to Phnom Penh via Hong Kong, opting to stay overnight at one of the loveliest hotels in the city, Lanson Place in Causeway Bay.

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**Adventure:** day trips to the mainland; opposite, the *Aqua Mekong*

It's a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World and the rooms come with Smeg kettles, Dyson hairdryers, Bluetooth speakers and Codage Paris bath products. It's tranquil, thoughtful, luxurious – as soothing as being in a day spa. When was the last time anyone expected such a thing in bustling Hong Kong?

From there, we fly into Cambodia's gleaming \$3 billion Techo International Airport,

which is (probably) the world's newest airport. It only opened last October, and it feels surreal to be in an airport so shiny and empty. It's a glorious design: a swooping canopy ceiling inspired by the Cambodian jungle allows natural light to filter through. It has a 9m-high gold Buddha statue, bronze fittings, falling greenery, and a fleet of Segways that look like nobody has ever stepped foot on them. The customs and immigration process is seamless, too. They've done a wonderful job.

From there, we are whisked to the port at Phnom Penh where the real adventure begins. The *Aqua Mekong* can take 40 passengers



but we arrive late in the season and there are only 14 of us. The guest-staff ratio, normally 1:1, is therefore 3:1 or, as our vivacious crew director Kristiaan explains: "There's 35 of us, and 14 of you."

Aqua Expeditions takes pride in finding staff who are cheerful, warm and helpful.

We settle into our rooms, do a little tour of our ship, and meet some of the other guests. Some of them have travelled with Aqua Expeditions previously and are already planning the next journey (Peruvian Amazon? Why not?)

Our ship, the *Aqua Mekong*, launched in 2014. It's a glamorous vessel, with a striking timber and

graphite exterior. The cabins are spacious. All have king beds, if you can believe that, and private bathrooms. All have floor-to-ceiling windows for panoramic river views. It is 39 degrees outside so we keep them closed. Every room is air-conditioned, and you can choose your own temperature.

On the first evening, after the welcome dance, Kristiaan goes over the itinerary. It's very much pick and choose, meaning you can do as little or as much as you want. A skiff comes to the ship and whisks guests to shore for the excursions, which are designed for the adventurous. You will need a



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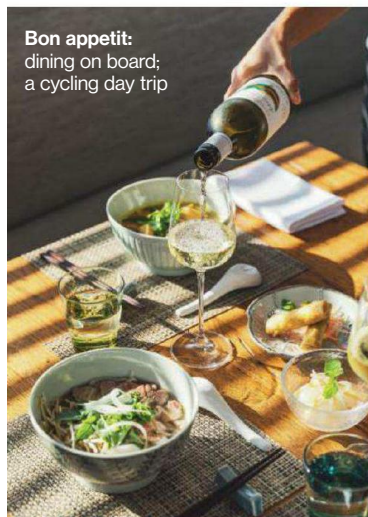
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# JOURNEYS



reasonable level of fitness for the bikes – especially when the weather is so hot – or else they'll provide a tuk-tuk, so you still get to see everything without breaking a sweat. If you do choose to ride or kayak, you may get muddy. You may get wet. Fear not: the staff emerge, even in the fields, with soothing towelettes and iced water and off you go again, making your way through the charming villages and rice fields and local markets (teeming while we are there, on the eve of Cambodian New Year, when kids run around with water pistols soaking all their friends). We are invited to observe the skills of traditional craftsmen including silk weavers, jug makers and silversmiths in the village of Koh Chen. A gentle note: this is more demonstration than real life. A nimble villager climbs a palm tree. Skinny chickens dash around. White oxen wander into our path. It's a lot of fun.

Guests may also choose to take an important excursion to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, housed in a notorious former prison named S21. Please be aware, the Khmer Rouge tortured people here during the communists' murderous regime in the late 1970s. It's confronting. The iron beds on which men and women were

shackled are still in place. Human skulls are stacked on shelves. The instruments of torture are on display. I do not hear a single person speak the entire time we are there. It is absolutely gut-wrenching to understand what happened during the Khmer Rouge's reign. It can never, ever happen again.

Back on the boat, there are so many small touches that make the journey special: staff take your shoes when you come back on board, and make sure they're clean and dry before you have to put them on again. There is (free!) laundry every day.

A special note about the food. This is a fine-dining ship. The Michelin-starred, Australian-born, Thailand-based chef David Thompson creates a seasonal menu with flavours from Vietnam and Cambodia. The staff bring out no fewer than three dishes, so you can try everything. The produce includes fresh ingredients from the region. Highlights include lamb curry with Khmer spices, Vietnamese sugar cane prawns, green mango salad with pineapple and pennywort, and coral grouper with a yellow bean salad.

As for breakfast, there are no packet croissants here. They have a pastry chef on board. And an omelet chef.

The dining area is intimate. You can make friends with your fellow travellers and eat together, or take a cosy corner table for two. On the final night, they take all the guests by private skiff to a little beach, where they set up folding chairs and serve cocktails while the sun goes down. Later still, they set up a fancy barbecue on the back deck, and everyone eats together.

Some guests on our trip choose to do every excursion there is, and

some choose to stay on board, revelling in the simple joy of being on the river. It is something to behold: the Mekong River is 4900km long. You will see fishermen pulling up their catch, and wonderful bird life (milky stork, spot-billed pelicans, all kinds of waders). And here's the thing: it makes sense not to rush too much.

The real beauty of this journey is in the quiet unveiling.

## CHECKLIST

**Set sail:** The *Aqua Mekong* sails between Vietnam and Cambodia with shore excursions and fine dining. Our three-night cruise, with meals, house wine/beer and excursions included, cost \$4715 per person; [aqualexpeditions.com](http://aqualexpeditions.com)

**Getting there:** We stopped over in Hong Kong, flying with Cathay Pacific (\$1200-\$1500 economy class return from Australia), [cathayair.com](http://cathayair.com)

**Where to stay in Hong Kong:** From the moment you walk into Lanson Place Causeway Bay (below), you sense the grace: there's a magnificent Murano chandelier, originally from a French chateau, in the lobby, and an orangery for reading and sipping tea; the rooms are beautifully decorated. [slh.com](http://slh.com)

