



Mekong Voyage

Gliding her way through Vietnam on a new boutique river ship, **Via Beamanis** explores a country from the water's edge

h E LOST HIS MOBILE somewhere between here and Saigon. Now he's panicking," smiles Francesco, glancing toward the man pacing the deck. "But I bet his wife's thrilled!"

"Here" is My Tho, a port town two hours from Ho Chi Minh, as the former Saigon is less romantically known. A handful of passengers are gathered round the outdoor bar as the *Aqua Mekong* readies for its sunset departure. Having founded Aqua

Expeditions as Peru's first luxury river cruise in 2008, Francesco Galli Zugaro, the brand's handsome mid-40s CEO, is now expanding into Asia.

"Honestly," he adds, "my preference would be for guests to give up technology all together and just immerse themselves in the experience."

There's certainly enough to distract them on *Aqua's* latest voyage, which explores the Mekong and its towns and tributaries from the vantage point of a floating five-star hotel. Designed by David Hodkinson of Noor Designs, a Saigon firm that specializes in glossy hotels, the 30-cabin *Aqua Mekong* is layered in soft lighting and polished wood. Its cabins are luxuriously appointed and proportioned, each with a veranda or sliding doors that open fully to the passing view. Outdoor space has received a nice boost, too. *Aqua's* latest craft – the others, the *Aqua Aria* and *Aqua Amazon*, are stationed in South America – is outfitted with an open-air bar, canopied daybeds, glowing floor lanterns, greenery and a large plunge pool. A screening room, full spa and glassed-in fitness room round out the list of savvy additions.

With bases anchored by historic,

CAMBODIA: THEN & NOW

We're en route to Siem Reap, the pretty inland town that's sprung up around Angkor Wat. Having spent time here in 2006, I'm astonished at how much it has grown.

Checking into Amansara, I discover the hotel is *in* town. Last time I stayed here, it was just *outside* town. Built in 1962 as a guesthouse for King Sihanouk's palace, this garden compound welcomed globetrotters from Charles de Gaulle and Jacqueline Kennedy to

Peter O'Toole during its '60s and '70s heyday. Designed by Laurent Mondet, it's still home to Siem Reap's hippest, high-end rooms.

Beyond the gates, Siem Reap's namesake river, lined in leafy trees and crossed by walking bridges, lends the city of 900,000 a picturesque charm. Gateway town to the world's most colossal religious monument, it's transformed itself into a bustling tourist hub since the Khmer Rouge was ousted in the '90s. A relaxed good vibe hangs in

the air; there's something tangibly sweet about this place. I'm struck by how many stylish foreigners have set up shop since my last visit; the design boutiques, cafés, restaurants owned by transplanted Parisians, New Yorkers and Californians – visitors who'd returned as residents, enticed by this far-flung corner of the earth.

The next morning, we're up at 5 for the drive to Angkor Wat. As it's 10 minutes from Amansara, the hotel enjoys special access to the World

Heritage site. We arrive before it opens to the public, only birdsong to break up the pre-dawn silence of the vast deserted 12th-century temple. Following our guide along stone loggias and antechambers, he shines a flashlight on ancient friezes and sculptures beheaded by the Khmer Rouge, quietly explaining the complex history and myth behind them.

As darkness lifts, the rhythmic chanting of Buddhist monks rings out from a nearby temple – a moment that counts as one

cultural landmarks – Peru's Machu Picchu, Asia's Angkor Wat – Aqua aims to offer the privileged traveller bucket-list destinations. If contemporary boat design and remote exotic locales are two angles of the experience, a third is fine regional cuisine.

To oversee the food program for Aqua's Mekong voyages, Zugaro handpicked the "very best and most creative chef in the region," David Thompson. An Australian whose current dining room, Nahm Bangkok, was crowned 2014's No. 1 Restaurant in Asia on the Diners Club annual 50 Best Restaurants in the World list. More laurels? Thompson's U.K. restaurant, Nahm London, was the first European address to earn a Michelin star for Thai cooking. No wonder, as Thompson is a chef who delights in discovering obscure ingredients and generations-old recipes for his authentic, often adventuresome, cuisine.

Thompson's onboard menus will cycle through Vietnamese beef Pho, Cambodian noodles heaped with ginger-braised prawns and velvety coconut-laced Thai curries. His staff trawls area markets and the Mekong's floating food bazaars for fresh local in-

gredients: Kampot pepper, crab, leafy Asian greens and lychees. Dinner one night sees us cooing over the combination of flavours in our appetizer – crabmeat sugared with toasted coconut, wrapped in fragrant basil leaves.

Having done Aqua's Peruvian excursion, Asia's guest list looks just as international; a mix of family groups, friends, and romantic duos, hailing from as far afield as Britain, Africa, America, India, Russia, Canada and Scotland. As river views slip by, we're deep into a giggly meal with the genteel Boyd Ferguson, the noted Cape Town designer behind Singita, South Africa's most stylish collection of safari camps, and his English beau, Daniel, a magazine writer. My London friend and I are prattling on about Ho Chi Minh's better hotels (Park Hyatt Saigon), the benefits of Cathay Business Class (duvets and fresh on-call dim sum) and how we're here on an adventure for her birthday.

Our days begin with a 6:30 wake-up call; split between morning and afternoon excursions, lunch back on the boat breaking up the schedule. Hopping on canopied speedboats, we're whisked off to the Mekong's various points of interest, gliding

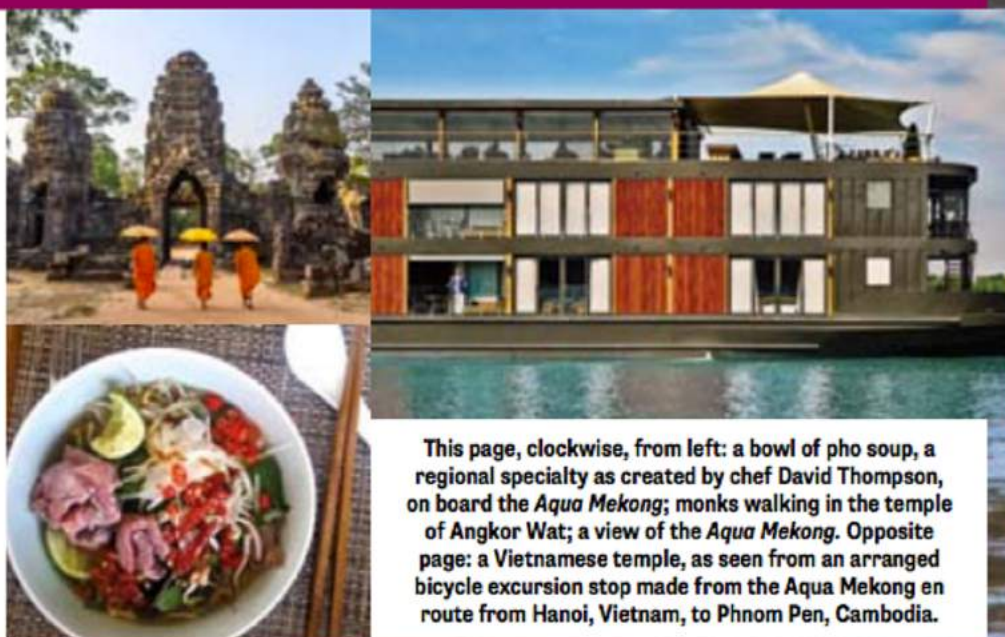
deeper into the river's jungle tributaries or exploring an exotic bird sanctuary. Jumping out to tour a temple here, a little town there, stopping by workshops where locals craft everything from woven mats to coconut taffy. As the boat is stocked with a fleet of black mountain bikes, we're equipped for leisurely guided rides along the riverbank's country roads, winding through rustic villages and tropical rainforest.

Excursions are optional, with the following day's agenda presented each evening during pre-dinner cocktails in the lounge. Care for a tour of an island silk farm or private audience with Buddhist monks at Long Son Tu Temple? Or stay on board, and you'll discover that splitting your time between massages in the spa and shaded daybeds by the pool as the Mekong rolls by, chilled glass of wine at hand, is a lovely way to spend an afternoon, too.

As we cross the Vietnam border and head into Cambodia, the river grows more bucolic, this side of the Mekong less developed and populated. The random dredging cranes of Vietnam give way to open water and endless green shoreline. ☐

of life's more sublime. "I want to come back," I say to my friend, "for like a month." "Me, too," she says. –VB

IF YOU GO Cathay Pacific, named World's Best Airline by Skytrax in 2014, offers daily non-stop flights to Hong Kong from Toronto and Vancouver (www.cathaypacific.com). For connecting flights, book Dragon Air (www.dragonair.com). For more info, go to www.aquaexpeditions.com and www.amanresorts.com/amansara.



This page, clockwise, from left: a bowl of pho soup, a regional specialty as created by chef David Thompson, on board the Aqua Mekong; monks walking in the temple of Angkor Wat; a view of the Aqua Mekong. Opposite page: a Vietnamese temple, as seen from an arranged bicycle excursion stop made from the Aqua Mekong en route from Hanoi, Vietnam, to Phnom Pen, Cambodia.

MENDWICI, CULTURA EXCLUSIVE (MEKONG BACKGROUND)