

Mekong River

JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

A trans-boundary river in Southeast Asia, the mighty Mekong is the world's twelfth-longest river and the seventh-longest in Asia, running from China to Vietnam. Offering a glimpse into the long history and diverse cultures of the region, a journey across the Mekong allows for an incredible experience to see daily life come alive as you pass through traditional villages, unforgettable sunsets, and learn about the activities, history, and cultures that live along the stretch of water they call the mae nam (mother of waters).

▶ Carol Wright

THE MEKONG ('MOTHER RIVER'), THE WORLD'S TWELFTH LONGEST, STITCHES TOGETHER SIX COUNTRIES: CHINA, MYANMAR, THAILAND, VIETNAM, CAMBODIA AND LAOS. On the serene stretches around Luang Prabang in Laos, laid back two days cruises to and from Chang Kong in Thailand travel past sparsely populated huge forests coating high hills.

One soothing way to watch the brown river waters swirl past, Lao beer in hand, is on the Luang Say boat (This cruise can be booked through www.traveltheunknown.com).

Traditional in style, the long boat has cushioned armchairs with individual tables taking 40 passengers. A guide shepherds guests around occasional village visits and a crew run the bar, bring round platters of banana crisps and tropical fruit and create lunch buffets of fried rice, lightly curried fish in banana leaves and stir fried vegetables.

There are secluded seating areas aft and forward. The open sides (with roll-down rain

protectors) frame passing scenery as the boat swings around majestic river bends. Passing boats are few, little interrupting the placid forests except in one spot tunnelling for the high speed train link to China estimated to be running by 2020.

Visiting Bor village, the little temple has vibrant panels depicting hellish horrors awaiting those who disobey Buddha's commandments – adultery has a particularly nasty comeuppance. The temple bells are made from American bomb casings. Below the stilted houses women weave bright coloured scarves and shawls for sale to tourists along with embroidery and

homemade whisky. Near Luang Prabang, the Pak Ou caves are visited where cavern ledges are crammed with hundreds of Buddha statues.

Mid cruise passengers stay at Luang Say's own lodge overlooking the river. Rooms modelled on river village homes in dark local wood have louvred 'windows' opening on each side to catch both views and breezes. Spacious rooms contain four poster beds draped with white gauzy mosquito nets centre and a big shower room. Traditional dancing and music precede a buffet dinner of local dishes.

From early 2018, a luxurious cruise option with nights spent in 23 large cabins and one suite will cover the same stretch of river taking two nights to Luang Prabang and three nights upstream to Thailand apart from the dry May-June season. Mekong Kingdoms (mekongkingdoms.com) will have boats offering not only guided village visits, but also yoga, meditation, wine tastings, cooking class, lectures, themed dinners, spa treatments, local dance performances, books from the library. Retractable roofs provide deck settings for sunset cocktails.

Mekong Kingdoms have other excursion and hire boats based at Luang Prabang. A personalised cruise for up to four people can be arranged on a boat with two overnight cabins. The perfect way to see a Mekong sunset is to hire Nomad for a champagne sunset cruise for two pottering along reclining on cushions while being served wine and canapés as the sun settles behind a mountain line.

Luang Prabang sits on a peninsula spearing out between the Mekong and the Nam Khan rivers. The meeting of the two rivers is clearly defined: the brown Mekong and the blue Nam Khan. The town is simple to navigate on foot or bicycle. Three main streets run east/west: the Mekong riverside, central main street and the Nam Khan riverside. These are laced together by

narrow tree filled alleys and a mix of glittering temples, cafes, restaurants, boutiques and hotels. A vibrant night market on Main Street sells souvenirs from embroidered aprons to bomb metal bracelets.

Textiles are Laos' leading craft. Ock Pop Tok ('east meets west') run by a Laotian-British couple offer some of the best examples at their town boutique or via free tuk tuk service at the workshop with free tours and cafe overlooking the Mekong en route to the Kuang Si falls that tumble in opalescent pools and rapids through thick forest that also has a sun bear refuge centre.

Once Laos' capital, Luang Prabang's main sightseeing attraction is the Royal Palace Museum displaying royal lifestyle from 2.5 kilo solid gold crowns to foreign heads of states' gifts including a piece of the moon.

Hotel choice ranges from the new Azerai with its excellent restaurant on main street, chic minimalist rooms round a large pool. Amantaka has a colonial feel to its white buildings, library, and verandahs, four posters, big free standing tubs and private patios some with small pools. There is a large garden set pool around which dinner is served.

Dinner is also served waterside at Maison Dalabua at the Manda de Laos restaurant serving old family recipes from around Laos. The water here is Unesco classified lotus pool around which rooms are secreted. Wooden overwater bungalows are peaceful bolt holes while the spa in a traditional Laotian house provides reasonably priced excellent treatments.

Another spot for special dining is the Governor's Grill at the Sofitel Hotel set in the former French Governor's residence. The peaceful open sided garden restaurant serves tasting menus including river seaweed crisps in an hors d'oeuvre platter and buffalo meat cooked in classical bourguignon, stroganoff and spit roasted ways. The restaurant has the unusual plus of fluffy pet rabbits wandering among the tables. ●

