







# Slow boat on the Mekong

Catching a slow boat along the Mekong is the best way to be immersed in the culture and charm of Cambodia and Vietnam. Jane Hodges went with the flow.

Reclining on my balcony, feet up with a crime thriller and an ice-cold Angkor beer in hand, I can feel the humidity rising. There's a storm brewing to the east and the glassy surface of the Mekong River is soon to be broken by shards of warm rain. I stand up and crane my head out over the railing to catch the first drops. It's then I see that I'm not alone. On the two decks above me passengers are taking in this spectacular tropical monsoon scene.

I retreat inside my cabin to sit and watch from the floor to ceiling window. It's like one, giant ever-changing postcard. We're passing a rickety clutch of timber and tin houses built on stilts along a narrow, lushly vegetated section of river. Locals, unperturbed by the deluge, are getting on with life on the river – pulling in fishing nets, washing clothes, mending boats. Kids wave and run along the banks cheering at us. And as quickly as it starts, it's over. Such is the drama of monsoon season on the mighty Mekong. The 12th largest river in the world, it snakes its way from the Tibetan Plateau through China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam before depositing the equivalent of 25 billion swimming pools of water into the South China Sea.

I'm on the *RV Jahan*, a 26-cabin cruise ship journeying from Siem Reap in Cambodia to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam. It's more like a boutique hotel afloat than any cruise

I've been on – it has the highest crew-to-passenger ratio of any boat on the river and the service is impeccable. The *Jahan* is a new vessel tastefully crafted to look like something out of the British India colonial era. Its stylish indoor-outdoor bar and lounge adjoin a plunge pool and spacious sun deck offering 360deg. views of the river. There's a small gym, a spa offering a range of face and body treatments, an observatory and a library stocked with a good collection of local historical and cultural volumes, novels and DVDs.

Even if you never left the boat, the constantly changing scenery, amazing and abundant food (local specialties and western-style buffets and a la carte) and heavenly massages would be enough to relax and refresh you.

## Explore village streets and markets

But it's the daily shore excursions that make this such a special way to experience Cambodia and Vietnam. Our local guides take us ashore to places we wouldn't find on our own and to meet people with amazing stories. We explore village streets and markets, wander around the 7th century Wat Hanchey temple, and get peddled through Phnom Penh's frenetic traffic on a cyclo; we meet fish farmers, Khmer potters, silversmiths, rattan mat makers, a tuk tuk driver who lost six family members to the Khmer Rouge and an old Vietnamese man who was a

LEFT: Boarding the *Jahan*.

PHOTO: © MAREE AZZOPARDI





Off on a shore excursion.

Viet Cong guerrilla during the war and now heads his village council working to improve the social and economic welfare of his community. It's through meeting the locals that you piece together how their history, culture, food and way of life shapes who they are. What is surprising and a real gift to me is despite enduring some of the saddest events in recent history – the cruelty the Cambodians suffered at the hands of Pol Pot's regime and the tragedy of the Vietnam War, the people we meet are not only resilient, but happy, welcoming and eager to connect with us.

It is at times a challenging experience. Reconciling floating past poor villages on a five-star boat and knowing the heartbreak many have suffered is a tricky business. Talking to Brett, our tour leader, helped to put it in perspective. "Tourism on the river is opening up parts of Cambodia and Vietnam that haven't benefited before. It's a very new thing for a lot of the villages we visit and it brings money to them and a rich insight for our visitors. We show you the real Mekong, not the tourist version, and you have an opportunity to learn and



Floating corner shop on the Mekong.



PHOTOS: © MAREE AZZOPARDI

to help.” In one village we visited, past passengers had donated water pumps and machinery that made life easier for the locals. (Travel Indochina further supports ethical tourism by donating to the Kampong Cham Orphanage – one of the most moving places we visited.)

Things are slow and gentle on the Mekong and it doesn't take long to capitulate to the rhythm of the river. Not wanting to miss any of the passing parade, each night I leave my cabin drapes open and drift off watching the boats ply past in the moonlight. Early morning light wakes me in time to join the daybreak Qi Gong class on the top deck – deep breathing and gentle flowing movements in tune with the slow drag of the current.

It's an exotic and intriguing journey but also a very human one. I only got through half a chapter of my book, watching real life float past was far too arresting. •

## TRAVEL FACTS:



### Getting there:

Vietnam Airlines flies daily from Sydney and Melbourne to Siem Reap [ @ ] [www.vietnamairlines.com](http://www.vietnamairlines.com)

Travel Indochina's 12-day journey begins with two nights at Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor in Siem Reap and a guided tour of the Angkor Wat temples; The cruise itinerary includes a day tour of Phnom Penh taking in the Royal Palace, National Museum, S-21 Genocide Museum and The Killing Fields; post-cruise, the program includes two nights at the Caravelle Hotel, Ho Chi Minh City, and a guided tour of the Reunification Palace, the War Remnants Museum and Ho Chi Minh Square.

[ @ ] [www.travelindochina.com.au](http://www.travelindochina.com.au) or tel: 1300 138 755.

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